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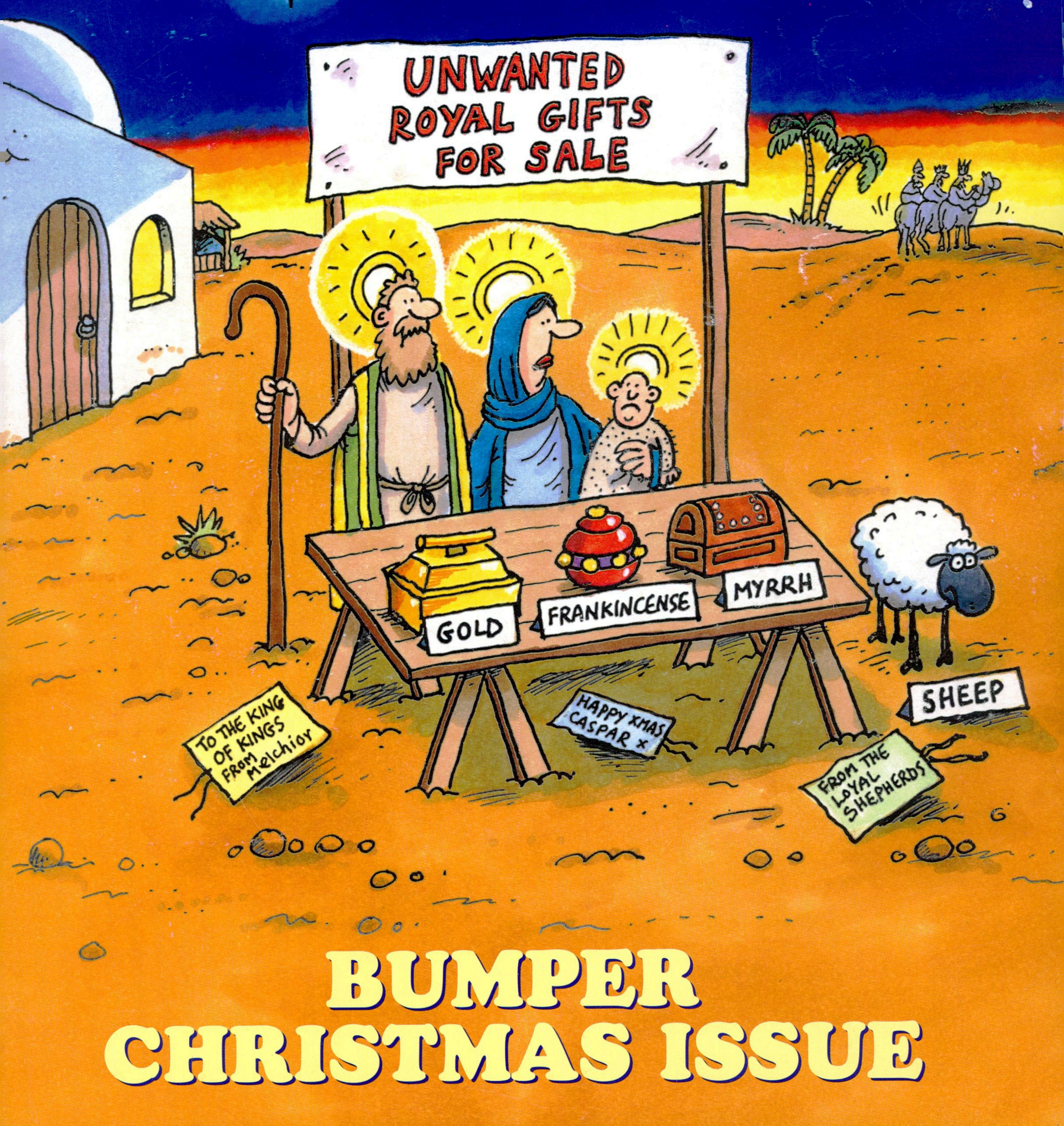
PRIVATE EYE



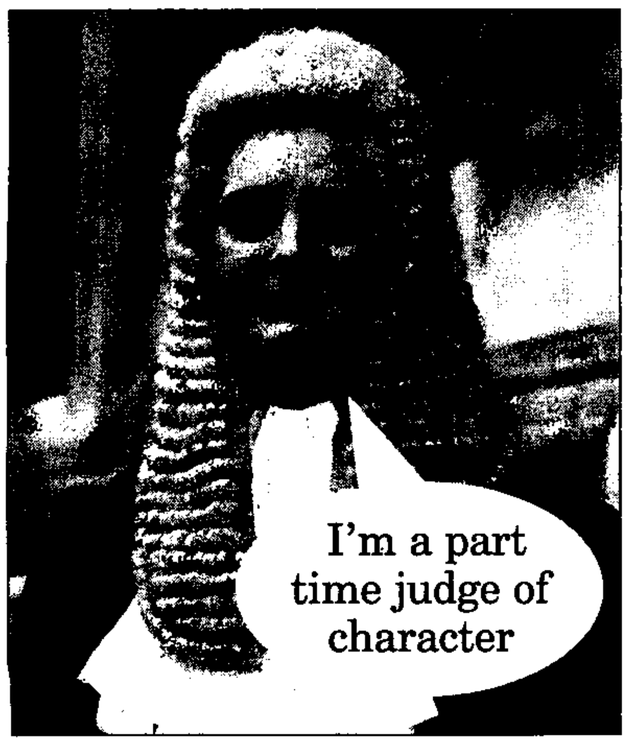
BUMPER CHRISTMAS ISSUE

Some things get better given longer.

Given a bit of time, some things improve enormously.
That's why every pint of Greene King Abbot Ale is brewed longer than other beers.
Giving it a smooth taste that shows our passion for brewing.

Brewed longer
for a distinctive,
full flavour.

TRIAL . . .



. . . AND ERROR

ON SALE NOW

The nation's favourite stocking-fillers for Christmas 2002 – **Private Eye Annual, Colemanballs 11** and **St Albion Parish News Book 5**

Apology

The book signings by the Editor, due to take place this week, have unfortunately had to be cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.

There will be no signings at Waterstone's in Birmingham, Hammicks in Harrow or W.H. Smith at Victoria Station. Sorry for any disappointment or inconvenience caused. Ed.

Cover illustration by Nick Newman

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ABC

All your Xmas turkeys

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IN THE TEAROOM

NO ONE in the tearoom has ever exactly believed the Number 10 spin machine, but irrespective of party allegiance they have all been in awe of it. No longer. The enchanted glass is broken and it cannot be put back together.

Certainly it is difficult to believe the current line that Alastair Campbell and his partner Fiona Millar are so savvy that they'd spotted Carole Caplin as a dangerous flake years ago. If only they'd been kept in the loop, so the line goes, they would have seen off the scammer boyfriend at his first approach. Campbell's fraud-busting record speaks for itself. He was, after all, an "intimate" of Cap'n Bob Maxwell – a con-artist in a class far above the antipodean snake-oil salesman Foster, but also one whom any idiot could see was a wrong'un from a fair distance. Campbell also thought it just fine and dandy to hang out at parties with the pornographer Richard Desmond and encourage his boss Mr Tony to have sleazy showbiz types round for drinks.

Not that the prime minister is any better. He judged that the people of Wales would prefer the evasive, feline Alun Michael to Rhodri Morgan, just because Rhodri had a slobbery dog and a scruffy house. He chose Keith Vaz as "a safe pair of hands". He talent-spotted the weaselly Stephen Byers as a political superstar for the future, put Geoffrey Robinson in the Treasury, went into bat for Lakshmi Mittal, relied on no one more than Peter Mandelson, and was truly amazed when it came out that his pal Bill Clinton had been fellated in the Oval Office by an intern.

These guys are just not good judges of character. But that's never really mattered so long as the plausibility machine was there to reassure us – that the firemen were greedy, that Dubya knows what he's doing, that we'd be better off with the Euro, that it was vital that 50 per cent of school leavers go to university, and ought to pay for it too, that public services will come right in the end. But now who's going to believe any of that?

'Urquhart'

PROOF that the Downing Street spin machine has been put into a spin of its own by Cheriegate was evidenced in the pisspoor quality of the "rebuttal" that followed revelations that Booth had told a series of large porkies over her relationship with a convicted fraudster.

Not a single cabinet minister took to the airwaves to denounce the *Mail on Sunday*, which first published the revelations. And where were the usually reliably on-message party whips, such as Houghton & Washington MP Fraser Kemp, or the legions of backbenchers offering selfless brown-nosing?

But just as Tony and Cherie were giving up all hope of anyone riding to the rescue, up popped Stephen Pound, the Ealing North MP and Mr Punch lookalike. The wasp-chewing Pound gallantly weighed in on Cherie's behalf for the benefit of *Channel 4 News* viewers. Such selfless activity may yet give Pound his reward in heaven – or at least a seat in the Lords, should he lose his Ealing berth at the next election.

FRIENDS of environment minister Michael Meacher were gobsmacked when the Dear Leader failed to punish the man once described as "Tony Benn's man on earth", after the famously protean Meacher was discovered to own some 12 properties with his partner.

This revelation emerged not long after Meacher had sanctimoniously attacked people for owning more than one home and after the Dear Leader was obliged to disown his minister's comments in the meejah. Now, in the light of Cheriegate, perhaps there is an explanation for the PM's latitude towards his errant minister.

NOT content with embarrassing the Rev. Blair and his officials, it seems Cherie Booth QC is also partly responsible for one of the government's most enduring headaches – the *froideur* between the vicar and his chancellor of the exchequer.

The feud has its origins, of course, in the 1994 dinner at Granita, where Blair persuaded Brown not to stand for the party leadership. But it has been exacerbated by Cherie's determination to sabotage every attempt by her husband at a rapprochement with his old friend. Blair confessed as much during a soul-baring conversation with a senior politician, who had asked why he couldn't mend fences with Brown. "I wouldn't have any problem with Gordon," the vicar wailed, "if it weren't for Cherie."

JACK STRAW insists that the Foreign Office has long been monitoring the human rights situation in Iraq, and that the timing of last week's "dossier" on the subject is coincidental.

Odd, then, that the subject is not one the FO finds space for in its country profiles on its website, which it encourages all travellers to consult before departure for foreign parts. While almost every country has a dedicated human rights section in its profile, the 1,300 words about Iraq include not one mention of the topic. Surely some mistake?

JOHN PRESCOTT's verbal gobbledegook has obviously infected his department.

A letter from the planning policies section to Cirrus Properties Ltd seemingly admits problems with improving affordable housing. It reads: "Thank you for your letter to the Deputy Prime Minister about lousy [*sic*] development in the South-East."

It goes on: "Your suggestions reflect the sustainable approach to meeting lousy needs advocated by this Government."

"It's our secret weapon – it'll bore them to death"

Street of Shame

THE self-righteous indignation of the *Daily Mail* is awesome to behold. The *Mail on Sunday*'s original story about Cherie Booth and Peter Foster "was absolutely correct in all important respects"; why then, it demands, did "supine" and "miserably craven" newspapers report Downing Street's initial denials?

Er, possibly because the *MoS* scoop was not absolutely correct. The one thing it got right was that Peter Foster had assisted Cherie with the purchase of two flats in Bristol. But the sole, uncorroborated source for this was a former business associate who claimed to have heard it from Foster himself, a convicted conman. On the same authority, the *Mail on Sunday* also reported that Foster "has been the Blairs' guest at Chequers", and that "government spin doctors had been instructed to improve his public image".

Hacks on other papers found it hard to credit these implausible boasts – which were indeed untrue. No wonder they were equally reluctant to accept the allegation about the flat-purchase without any supporting evidence. While ranting against its rivals, the *Mail* has somehow failed to notice that what prompted their caution was a justified suspicion that the *MoS* article was a mish-mash of fact and fantasy, and there was no way of knowing at that stage which was which.

The *Daily Mail* argues that Fleet Street should have accepted the story's veracity without question, and shouldn't even have reported Downing Street's denials. It might seem odd for a newspaper to demand greater credulity from reporters, but at least editor Paul Dacre practises what he preaches: his paper also believes that a secret code in the Old Testament predicted the 11 September terrorist attacks – and that the pyramids were built by little green men from Mars.

"WORLD EXCLUSIVE: the Killer Email," the *Sunday Mirror*'s front page boasted last weekend. Yet it wasn't even a national exclusive: the *News of the Screws* had a copy of the same email, a message sent by Peter Foster to half-witted ex-footballer Paul Walsh, his disgruntled former business partner.

Walsh had been hawking the "killer email" around Fleet Street for weeks, at an asking price of £50,000. To start a bidding war, he agreed to be interviewed by both the *Screws* and the *Sunday Mirror*. The *Screws* duly bid £50,000, beating the *Mirror*'s offer of £30,000 – but then changed its mind because it could get similar material from another "friend" more cheaply.

Believing that the *Screws* had bought it, the *Mirror* figured it could run the email anyway and claim to have lifted it from the *NoW*'s first edition. Unbeknown to them, the *Screws* was planning exactly the same trick in reverse. Unlike the *Mirror*, the *Screws* stuck to its plan and waited for the first edition of the *Sunday Mirror* to drop before using the email. As a result, neither paper feels obliged to pay Paul Walsh, who has thus been ripped off twice over – first by Peter Foster, and then by the very hacks he hoped would help him stitch up the conman!

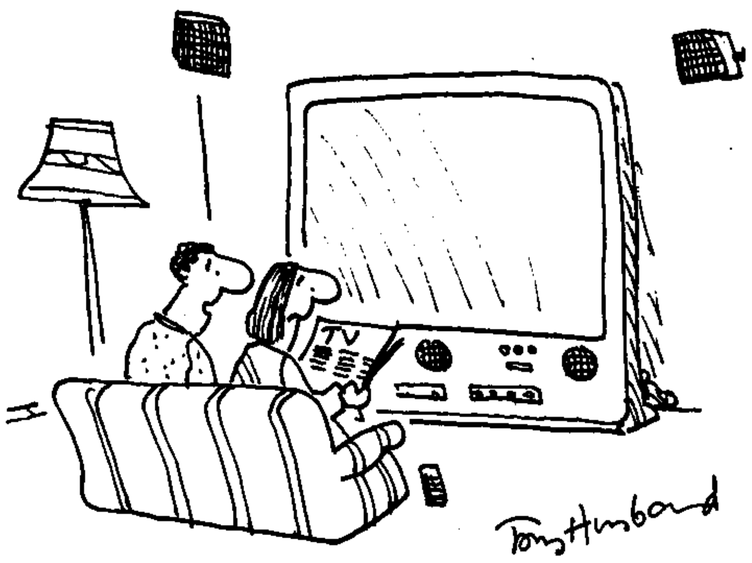
PETER FOSTER isn't the only ex-lover of former page three girl Samantha Fox to have sought his fortune in the diet-aids business. Last Sunday's *News of the World* interviewed her previous boyfriend Kit Miller, described as a "former Fleet Street journalist" who worked as Foster's PR man in the mid-1980s plugging Bai Lin "slimming tea" and a fat-shrinking thigh cream.

Oddly, however, it neglected to add that Miller is in fact a former *NoW* hack – and that, after he moved into PR, it was his old colleagues at the *Screws* which plugged his products most energetically.

In 1987 the paper stumbled on what seemed a great scoop: Samantha Fox was pregnant! Pure fiction, of course, but in the hope of getting Kit Miller's cooperation on the story the newly-appointed *Screws* editor Wendy "Badger" Henry agreed to run a prominent free puff for his slimming pills, urging readers to send their money to an accommodation address in East London. The write-up was so hyperbolic that no fewer than 200,000 people sent cheques and postal orders for £10 a time to Miller, who thus made £2m in a few days. Alas, readers soon began grumbling about the non-arrival of pills and asking for their money back: the *Screws* received a record 25,000 letters of complaint. Wendy Henry, fearing the chop, organised a Watergate-style cover-up. Senior executives were sworn to secrecy, and both the Dirty Digger and his readers were kept in the dark about the sort of deal she'd done with the wretched Miller. As, it seems, they still are.

In its piece about Kit Miller and Peter Foster last Sunday, the *Screws* also claimed that "the pair fell out when shady Foster fled to Australia in 1987 leaving Kit to deal with a string of angry creditors". How curious, then, that as late as 1995 the duo were sharing an office in Potters Bar and hyping up Thigh Tone 1, a miracle thigh-thinning cream selling at a modest £24 a tub. By then Miller had reverted to his original name, Chris Williams, while Foster was calling himself "Peter Cooper" – except when posing as "Mr Poletti" in a vain attempt to persuade Britt Ekland to endorse his product. (Poletti, it transpired, was the maiden name of Foster's mother.) Asked at the time why they were using aliases, Miller explained: "There is a problem with the past."

Just so. Fittingly enough, in yet another of his previous incarnations, Kit Miller was a trapeze artist in a circus.



"What do you mean, there's nothing on worth watching?"

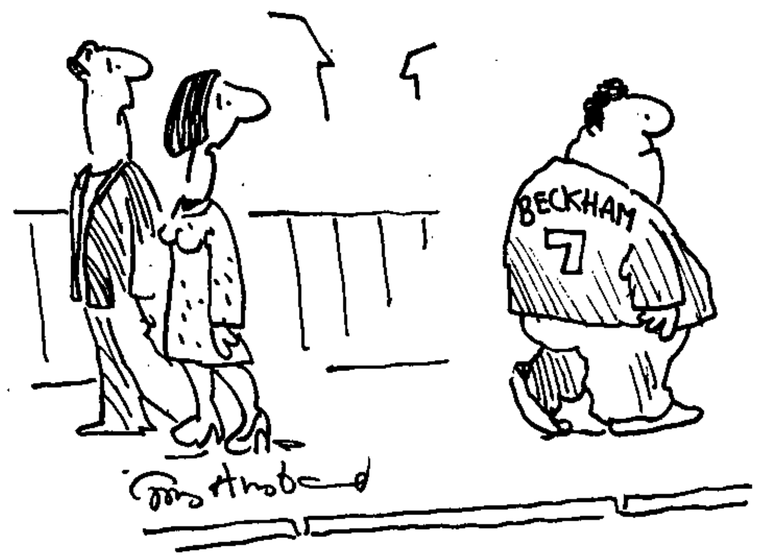
BOOK your ringside seats now. The epic litigation between Richard "Dirty" Desmond and his former pornographer-in-chief Deric Botham finally reaches the high court on 3 February.

"I shall be telling all about Desmond," Botham has been assuring friends. "I intend to sing like a canary and squeal like the proverbial stuck pig."

As *Eye* readers will recall, these legal "porn wars" began when Botham and several colleagues decided to desert *Asian Babes* and the Fantasy Channel, setting up their own string of top-shelf mags and forming a partnership with the rival Playboy Channel. With the date of their court showdown looming, Dirty Des is trying to pile on the pressure by firing off yet more writs at Botham and anyone associated with him.

One recipient of a Desmond writ last week was Oskar Fiducci, who is listed in Botham's mags as the "sole proprietor" and has therefore joined the list of defendants accused of damaging Des's smut-empire by setting up in direct competition.

Oskar Fiducci has so far been unable to talk to his lawyers about how he should reply. He is Botham's two-year-old bluepoint Birman cat.



"Doesn't he look different on television?"

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH hacks watched with bewilderment recently as their very own newsroom drama unfolded. It was a Saturday and the paper was running an hour late. Editor Dominic Lawson and his deputy Matthew D'Ancona were hovering as the finishing touches were added to the front page by deputy production editor Esdale Maclean.

New boy Maclean was in charge of production as his old pal, production editor Bob Cowan, had the night off. Esdale had already faced problems getting to grips with the paper's ancient Atex system. Now he had the paper's bosses hanging over his shoulder like two gargoyles at the most crucial point in the newspaper's weekly cycle. The pressure got too much. He "pressed the wrong button" and the whole system crashed. Ever calm in the face of adversity, Lawson lost his temper and screamed: "You've lost control of this newspaper. Get out!" With that he pulled Maclean's chair away from the computer and wheeled it at speed, with Maclean still sitting in it, across the office in front of the startled hacks.

IN ITS desperation to be the first paper to publish a "complete TV listings guide for Christmas and the New Year", the *Daily Express* rushed out an "indispensable 32-page guide to all the best in drama, comedy and film" that seemed to consist largely of blank spaces. No fewer than 180 hours of programming were listed merely as "TBA" – To Be Announced.

Fortunately, *Express* readers were given complete and indispensable details of *one* channel's offerings over the holy season – Dirty Des's satellite-porn station, Television X. So there's no excuse for them to miss such festive family delights as *Strappy Christmas*, *Butt Addicts* and *Dildo Dan*.

REVENGE was sweet for taxi drivers who convinced *Times* hack Anthony Browne that they were about to hand him details of a huge defence scandal.

Outraged over a recent article in which he accused London cabbies of running a "white working-class mafia", the licensed taxi drivers association (LTDA) lured Browne out of Fortress Wapping with *Taxi News* journalist Steve McNamara posing as an MoD whistleblower wanting to talk about nuclear waste being transported by air.

On arrival at a rendezvous in Camden, Browne was mobbed by cabbies dressed as Santa while LTDA general secretary Bob Oddy presented him with a Prat of the Year award.

FASHIONS change ever more quickly these days – not least in *The Scotsman*'s S2 section, which recently introduced opened its beauty section with a piece on "bionic style" which declared "piercing is becoming passe and tattoos are ancient history".

The following page carried a report on regulation of the piercing industry, which began "as the popularity of body piercing and tattooing grows..."

JUST FANCY THAT!

"The Aussies don't have a psychological hold over us..." — Nasser Hussain, *Daily Star*, 28 November 2002.

"There's no denying Australia have a psychological hold over us." — Mark Butcher, *Daily Star*, 28 November 2002.

BARELY two months into the job, *GQ*'s new columnist Will Self has already fallen foul of editor Dylan Jones, latter-day Beau Brummel and king of product-placement.

For his second column Self described how he was greeting the onset of middle age by commissioning a bespoke tweed suit – rather than buying one off the peg from "Snob Gap, or Hackett, or whatever it is they call it". He noted, however, that with global warming his thick tweed schmutter would only really come into its own on expeditions to Antarctica, where Self would be able to tell his shivering companions: "If you young whippersnappers had really wanted to make it to the Pole first, *you shouldn't've* worn that bloody Burberry."

Jones, whose passionate puffs for designer watches and sunglasses were chronicled in *Eye* 1065, was unamused. One of his *GQ* flunkeys was ordered to send an urgent memo to Self demanding the excision of the phrases "Snob Gap" and "bloody Burberry". Why? "Gap and Burberry are advertisers," he explained, "and Jeremy Hackett contributes to the mag."

Driving instructors will no longer ask motorists taking their test to execute three-pint turns

S. Wales Guardian

IF ONLY CHERIE READ THE *EYE*...

"NEWS reaches me from distant shores of Peter Foster... Foster, former beau of the mis-shapen nude model Samantha Fox, is to be found sunning himself in his Gold Coast mansion in Queensland, Australia. This will interest the authorities in Britain, Canada and the US – all of whom Foster is trying to avoid following his [slimming] tea scams."

— *Private Eye*, 11 May 1990.

"MEANWHILE, in an unrelated case Down Under, former ... lover of Samantha Fox, Peter Foster, is being sought by trading standards officers in connection with an allegedly fraudulent brand of thigh cream. Officials from Australia's trade practices commission fear that he may have fled to England..."

— *Private Eye*, 2 June 1995.

"We bring gold, frankincense and merchandising"

BITCHWATCH

UNTIL David Beckham started firing legal threats around at the end of last month, the name Popbitch meant little to most newspaper readers. It was, however, very familiar in newspaper offices, being the source of more showbiz "exclusives" than you'd care to mention.

Popbitch began as a weekly email newsletter put together by staff at Emap, the magazine empire behind a number of celebrity and entertainment titles. Started by Neil Stevenson at the end of 1999, it was a repository for all the stuff the hacks couldn't get away with publishing in their own magazines due to lack of proof, libel laws and, most crucially, the need to keep celeb PRs and agents on-side.

Mailed to industry mates and anyone who heard about it and wanted to subscribe, the newsletter was an entertaining mix of educated guesswork (the identity of the teen pop princess who supposedly allowed record company executives to snort cocaine from her breast was made as obvious as possible without actually naming her), absurd dressing-room demands circulated by disgruntled tour staff, and harmless trivia that wouldn't be out of place in *Smash Hits* or *Just 17*.

Every single one of the Popbitch's methods was subsequently adopted wholesale by the tabloids. The *Mirror* created the 3am Girls, a blatant attempt to copy the Popbitch attitude, complete with its own "Wicked Whispers" in the same no-name, no-writ style. The latter feature was lifted wholesale by the *Mail* to give *Express*-exile John McEntee something to do; while the *Star* launched its own daily clone under the subtle name of The Bitches.

More obviously, however, the papers just lifted Popbitch stories. Arriving bright and early every Thursday in showbiz editors' and diarists' inboxes, the email provides a ready source of headlines for the entire weekend (the Bizarre column in the *Sun* has in the past milked it all the way till Monday). Recent examples include the Michael Barrymore / Paul Burrell tryst mailed by Popbitch on Thursday under the title "Stories We Wish Were True" – and printed on the front of Sunday's *News of the World* with no such qualms.

So why didn't the papers print the Beckham rumour when it first appeared? Had it appeared in the weekly email, they almost certainly would have done. The affair rumour, however, was posted on the messageboard of the accompanying website, to which anyone can add anything they feel like (unless it contains the words "Jeremy" or "Clarkson", thanks to legal threats over an especially scurrilous story posted last year).

For several days at the end of November it featured much idle speculation about David Beckham's sex life, though it mostly consisted of messages rubbishing any suggestion of an affair. This, however, was enough to prompt letters from Beckham's lawyers insisting that all comment cease, and indeed that he join Clarkson as a subject that dare not speak its name on the messageboard. This was duly reported in the Thursday email under the heading "Smoke? Fire?" – and newsrooms around the country swung into action.

It became fairly obvious fairly quickly that the rumour wasn't true and couldn't be repeated – not that that stopped Friday's *Mail* splashing with "David Beckham and THAT shameful internet rumour" as a front page tease. Inside it printed nothing of the sort, instead reporting on a mysterious and "mischievous rumour about the England captain" which "has been spreading like wildfire". Some of that at least was down to the efforts of one *Mail* executive who had forwarded it to everyone he knew the day before.

The *Sun*, in a monumental act of humbug, pretended to be equally outraged, quoting a net expert on "web lies": "It might be a good laugh for the hoaxers but for the celebrities it is very upsetting." Yes indeed.

Non-net savvy readers were still ignorant as to what the rumour actually was. That was soon cleared up – despite Beckham's statement that "no publication of these rumours should be made as it would result in legal liability for defamation", the *News of the World* went ahead and printed them anyway. "Beckham: The Truth", crowed the *Screws* over an article detailing, er, the lies. "We solve riddle of slurs that have gripped world," was the rag's subsequent boast – slightly undermined by the plea at the end of the piece: "Do you know the FA rat who sent the Beckham email? Call us..."

The *Sunday People* meanwhile leapt to the moral high ground. "To put things on a website and hide is very naughty", they quoted a friend of the Beckhams as saying. "You can't play with people's lives like that. It's outrageous." Yes indeedy.

The *Sunday Times* steered clear of repeating the allegations, though a whole page of the News Review was devoted to the story. Three weeks ago the same section loftily summed up the "gay rape at the palace story" by informing its readers that "editor after editor has been teasing readers and tormenting the prince by printing stories about the alleged rape – without naming the perpetrator – alongside separate articles about Charles's loyal servants. Fun for those in the know, who recognise the 'rapist's' name and face in the stories about the servants, but probably bewildering for those who don't." Naturally, this was illustrated by a large picture of the man in question. This time, however, the paper played safe – although it took the opportunity to reprint another equally scandalous allegation from that week's Popbitch email, about a government minister having an affair, along with tantalising black "censored" bars over the more incriminating words.

The following day, the *Mirror* was back on the case "exposing" Stevenson as the editor of Popbitch. This is true – if not quite the "secret story" it claimed, since he has been named in other papers on several previous occasions. It did, however, give the paper the chance to repeat the allegation about the minister – which, in a spectacular rewriting of history, it described as a "3am-style wicked whisper".

In the *Mail*, meanwhile, columnist Stephen Glover picked the Beckham rumours as this week's sign of the decline of western civilisation. "It is like a virus which, once it has entered the bloodstream of the worldwide web, multiplies itself thousands and then millions of times," he opined. His argument might have carried more force had the *Mail*'s "Wicked Whispers" column on the same day not featured a story about Charlotte Church recording "a raunchy song with her boyfriend's band Goldie Locking Chain" called "Stick It In Cider". Not only had the story been revealed as absolute nonsense a full week previously when *heat* magazine was forced to print an apology to the singer, it was lifted directly from the Popbitch message board. "I know this was a baseless rumour because I put it there", a Popbitch regular tells the *Eye*.

Stevenson spent the last week on holiday, the Popbitch messageboard remained closed, and no email was sent out on Thursday, which means showbiz hacks will actually have to find some stories of their own. Unless, of course, they just decide to make something up and print it – remembering to point out, of course, that it isn't true.

Number crunching

15 ■ number of articles in British press last week complaining about the Beckhams' privacy being invaded by scurrilous emails

20 ■ number of articles in British press last week detailing the Beckhams' security measures, where they shop, where Brooklyn might go to school etc., etc.

JOHN PRESCOTT surprised fire-fighters by his assertion in the Commons on 26 November that 20 per cent of the industry "will be taking early retirement over the next few years – for some of them it will be extremely early because 70 per cent of such retirements are for medical reasons".

Many fire-fighters don't accept those figures, but the point will be sensitively appreciated by Gerry Wilmot, chairman of the Wiltshire fire authority and a Conservative member of the employers' team on the industry's national joint council. Mr Wilmot was chief fire officer on Merseyside in the 1980s, and retired on health grounds to take up a fire-protection job for a private company in Bristol.

Another point forcefully made by Mr Prescott is that many fire-fighters have more than one job. This will also be appreciated by the man who led the inquiry into fire-fighters' claim, Professor Sir George Bain, who is not only vice-chancellor of Belfast University, but also a director of Blackwell Publishers Ltd, The Economist Group, Canada Life Assurance Co, and Shorts Brothers PLC, a Canadian arms company in Northern Ireland.

PIN-BRAINED control freaks in the Labour whips office are refusing to include notices of meetings of the newly formed Labour MPs fire fighters support group in the whips' "weekly note" to MPs.

The convenors of the group – John McDonnell MP and John Cryer MP – met the deadline for inclusion. Yet while MPs were able to read all about the "all-party beer group", there was not a word on the fire fighters' support group. Naively, the fire brigades union still makes large annual donations to the Labour Party.

DAVID BLUNKETT is learning the hard way that a national ID card scheme is a bad idea. He decided that asylum seekers, of course, should be used as guineapigs and mobile home office units have been dispatched to issue refugees with "asylum registration cards", complete with picture and thumb print. Already some have been found to carry the wrong ID number, and some the wrong date of birth.

Meanwhile Sodexho, the French company distributing cash vouchers to asylum seekers, has written to them saying they will only get their benefit if they produce their ID card – but so far only about 16,000 out of 90,000 on Sodexho's books have so far received them. To cap it all, the asylum card, which Blunkett boasted "would prevent fraud [and] provide evidence of identity and nationality" is being rejected by banks, the DVLA and just about everyone else because the home office (with good reason, it seems) refuses to guarantee the details are accurate!

IVOR CAPLIN, junior whip and Labour MP for Hove, is full of praise for a local primary school in his newsletter to constituents.

"St Andrew's... was singled out as one of the best school's in England..." he writes. "The school was picked out because of it's excellent exam results..." Elsewhere in the letter he notes that "specialist schools are a key part of the Governments plans to transform secondary education."

Does that include any specialist apostrophe colleges?

JACK STRAW'S sudden realisation that Saddam Hussein presides over a regime of extreme human rights abuses was more than just a cynical PR manoeuvre to garner support for war. It was also designed to head off criticism for the government taking in at least 1,000 Iraqi Kurds as part of the deal struck with the French to get the Sangatte refugee centre across the Channel closed down.

It wasn't very long ago that these very same refugees were being condemned for massing on our borders and trying to exploit our asylum system. Now as they enter – not actually as refugees, but with four-year work permits and the promise of housing and support until they find work – spare a thought for thousands of their countrymen who were refused asylum before the government's recent conversion to the fight for human rights in Iraq. Many of them by the Straw man himself when he was Home Secretary.

Last year only 805 out of 8,875 Iraqis were granted refugee status; a further 1,800 were given the lesser status of exceptional leave to remain (which Straw's successor, David Blunkett is set to abolish). No less than 6,270 were refused. And because there is no safe route by which to return them to Iraq, they are now left in limbo, not legally entitled to work or support. Many become destitute, while others join the "black" economy.

Bush At Christmas

ACCOUNTANTS at KPMG analysed the figures for the private finance initiative (PFI) redevelopment of West Middlesex hospital with their usual scrupulous care – and when the sums failed to justify privatisation, they simply "reappraised the figures" until they did.

As adviser to the hospital trust, KPMG prepared what is known as the "public sector comparator" – the imaginary cost of rebuilding and running the hospital in the public sector. The government uses this figure to "prove" that PFI schemes save the NHS cash. But according to the national audit office (NAO) report into the deal, the "trust's initial comparison showed the PFI price slightly higher than the cost of conventional procurement".

KPMG calculated that rebuilding and managing the hospital in the public sector would cost £976.5m, while PFI came in at £984.1m. The accountants had a simple solution: they simply "encouraged the trust to revisit these figures" and added more money for the unknown "risks" of staying in the public sector.

"Risk workshops" were held to invent new costs associated with the "risk" of privatising the hospital. KPMG then added an extra £12.5m to the public sector cost and – hey presto – PFI looked worthwhile.

In fact the accountants probably needn't have bothered. The NAO reveals that Alan Milburn's department of health is so wedded to the PFI ideal that "the department told us that it would not necessarily withhold approval for a PFI project that appeared slightly more expensive than the conventional procurement".

OBN

'Jacques Chirac is a great man in every sense of the term, and he knows perfectly well how to combine the values of democracy and the role that France must play in the world. I respect that.

'Jacques Chirac is dignified without being pompous. This is part of his charisma, which is felt beyond the borders of his own country.'

TONY BLAIR
Letter to Paris Match,
quoted in Daily Mail
(Submitted by J. James)

£10 paid for entries put forward for the Order of the Brown Nose.

LABOUR'S decision to force all-women short-lists on most of those constituencies where the sitting MP will have decided whether to retire by 31 December, presents party HQ with something of a headache.

Since many of the old-stagers who are refusing to stand down are either a) misogynists, or b) don't want some Blairista wannabee thrust upon them, it follows that there will be precious few opportunities for some of the young male Turks around the Dear Leader to land themselves a safe seat come the next election.

But party chiefs can impose a candidate – of either sex – when an MP announces his or her decision to stand down at the last minute "to spend more time with the family". Veteran Labour watchers in the north-east are speculating that former chief whip Derek Foster, who has postponed any retirement plans, may "change his mind" nearer to the general election – perhaps for a seat in the Lords. Foster's rock-solid seat of Bishop Auckland could then be handed over to some deserving soul – probably a deserving soul who happens not to emanate from the sisterhood.

"THERE are one or two advantages of having a public profile," announced the Labour MP for Medway, Bob Marshall-Andrews, to a group of cartoonists recently.

"Last week I was travelling to Heathrow when the cabbie opened the glass panel and said; 'Alright then, give us a clue?' I replied that I was a QC and an MP and that I also sometimes appeared on television. At which point the cabbie exploded; 'No, which f***ing terminal?'"

"The turkey got away"

LABOUR'S CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

WHILE the government dispassionately considers whether to build more airport runways, the Labour party has become £30,000 richer thanks to a donation from Manchester Airport Group.

Transport secretary Alistair Darling announced a consultation for a new air transport white paper on 23 July… and Manchester Airport Group promptly gave Labour a cheque on 30 August. Though it was just in time for the party conference, the donation has only recently been revealed.

Manchester Airport Group is Britain's second largest operator and runs Manchester, East Midlands, Humberside and Bournemouth airports. It is a leading member of the Freedom to Fly lobby organisation which is pressing for more runways and is run by Labour insider Brenda Dean.

The airport group is actually owned by the ten councils around Manchester, so its donation is a kind of state subsidy to Labour. Perhaps the royal commission on environmental pollution, which recently said the expansion of Britain's airports should be halted immediately because planes contribute so greatly to global warming, should consider donating to the party.

LAST year the *Eye* revealed how the department of transport's official reception at the Labour party conference was sponsored by Moto, the motorway service arm of Compass Group.

Moto asked the department to "relax" rules stopping service stations selling goods that would make them "destinations". Though ministers previously opposed service stations becoming shopping centres as this would cause more traffic jams, this month the government did a U-turn over the central reservation and gave permission for pilot schemes for motorway service stations to run supermarkets.

Two pilots have been granted exclusively to… Moto!

THOUGH business donations to Labour are drying up, the party does have one new donor: lobby firm Sovereign Strategy, which gave payments totalling £14,850 in July and August.

Sovereign recently hired Jack Cunningham as a director — a move even condemned by the lobbyists' trade body, the Association of Professional Political Consultants (APPC), which frowns on lobby firms hiring serving MPs as it's just so potentially sleazy.

While Cunningham is the only remaining MP working directly for a lobby firm, Sovereign is still well connected to the party. It was founded by Chris Donnelly, former leader of the Labour group in the European parliament. Its clients include Max Mosely and Bernie Ecclestone and their Formula One operation; Bloomberg; Premier Waste Management; and chemical firm Rhodia. Sovereign tells the *Eye* the payments to Labour weren't related to one client account, though.

SAME OLD TORIES

MORE on the top Tories who got their sums so badly wrong in split capital trusts – the investment vehicles that promised such high returns to investors but are now comprehensively in the mire (see last *Eye*).

It seems some of the funds spent a lot of money investing in each other. While this guaranteed fees for the firms, it didn't help investors, some of whom have seen their savings disappear.

Scottish Tory leader Malcolm Rifkind is one of the top Tories who has been helping to lose other people's money. He sits on the board of Aberdeen Asset Management, the firm getting most public criticism and described by David Ruffley, Tory member of the treasury select committee, as "the unacceptable face of the City".

Aberdeen owns another split capital fund, the "European Growth and Investment Trust PLC". This is doing so badly it sacked three directors in October to cut costs. However, there's still room on the slimmed down board for three Tories.

One is the discredited former Tory chancellor Lord Lamont, who is a director alongside Viscount Astor, the Tories' junior shadow foreign affairs minister. Chairman of the board is Peter Malone, a former Winchester Tory MP and one-time Scottish editor of the *Sunday Times*. Despite these wise heads the value of the European Growth & Investment Trust has not grown at all. The directors found it "disheartening to report that… events have conspired to frustrate further the performance of the Company. The portfolio's asset value has fallen over the last six months and the income stream from the revenue portfolio has suffered significantly".

Astor is also on the board of another poorly performing investor with split capital exposure, the New Star Global Fund. And another top Tory, former cabinet minister Lord Gowrie, sat on the board of the Yeoman Investment Trust. It was such a sturdy yeoman that during the summer it suspended its shares and called in receivers. Yeoman had invested in Aberdeen Asset funds… and Aberdeen had invested in Yeoman. When the company crashed savers were left with nothing.

"I got this one for not rocking the boat in the Joint Services Resource Allocation Committee"

BAILING OUT

MORE sorry tales of privatised incompetence and waste in the country's bail hostels reach the *Eye*.

Not to outdone by the Kent hostel which was sent two maintenance staff from London to change a lightbulb, the contractor sent to perform a similar job at a hostel in Lincoln came from Cheshire – some 100 miles away. But at least he remembered his ladder and screwdriver.

LATE NUKES

KIND WORDS in the press for Adrian Montague, the new chairman of nuclear operator British Energy, effectively imposed on the firm by Patricia Hewitt. He is a "suave banker" (*Independent*) , "Mr Fixit" (*Mail*), "Just the man" (*Times*), "Mercurial" (*Guardian*). The *FT* says he has "years of experience cleaning up the mess left by failed privatisations".

However, as *Eye* readers know, Montague actually has years of experience making a mess with failed privatisations. As a solicitor at Linklaters he advised on the privatisation of British Rail (a disaster); he then worked on the Skye Bridge PFI (a disaster to the public). As a Labour favourite he renegotiated the contract on the Channel Tunnel rail link where, according to the national audit office, "the taxpayer could be exposed to further financial risk of £360m on current forecasts". He was John Prescott's personal adviser on the Tube PPP privatisation (a disaster in the making). He became a Labour favourite after Geoffrey Robinson (a disastrous minister) took a shine to him. Now he has his hands on nuclear materials. Time to take to the hills!

JUST FANCY THAT!

TRANSPORT for London has confirmed that for two weeks before next year's introduction of the congestion charge, and for six weeks after, it will be suspending its road works on major routes. Just fancy that!

Alas for Mayor Ken, TFL has no control over holes in the road caused by utility companies… and they account for 90 percent of roadworks.

NASTY NIP IN THE SEA

THE Antiguan capital St John boasts a new covered market, vastly improved roads and two new $15m fishing complexes.

Neighbouring countries have also done well: Grenada has a $11m fish market and dock, Dominica a $18m port and fish market, there are various projects underway for $24m in St Lucia and $6m more in St Vincent. Haven't these developing countries done well?

It's all paid for of course by Japan in return for their consistent support for a Japanese desire to resume large-scale commercial whaling. They show their loyalty by constantly voting in Japan's favour at the International Whaling Commission.

This policy of bribing poorer countries has been very successful. All of these nations have a perfect voting record in Japan's favour at the IWC, with just one or two abstentions here and there. Japan is now reaching out to "help" more of them. Hence Japan's current policy of lobbying the IWC – with Antigua's approval – to reduce its membership fees for poorer nations, enabling more bribe-tolerant countries to climb aboard the gravy train.

At the same time Japan has asked for the IWC to increase dramatically the fees paid by wealthy, whale-friendly countries, again with Antigua's faithful support. Indeed, Japan is so grateful for Antiguan loyalty that the country's whaling commissioner, Dave Joseph, has at last been made Japan's "roving ambassador" to the Caribbean.

Now similar tactics are being employed in an effort to influence votes at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Japan's recent bid to hunt Bryde's and minke whales in "the northern hemisphere" almost succeeded, thanks to Antigua, Dominica and Grenada (41 votes to 54 at the Santiago CITES conference).

Unhappily, Japan's purchase of CITES votes has become so obvious it is now lobbying hard to introduce secret balloting. Naturally a certain group of Caribbean nations, whose representatives enjoyed Japanese hospitality at Santiago's posh Crowne Plaza hotel, is backing this project in full.

FTVE

Xmas And New Year Schedules (All Channels)

WHILE it almost never snows at Christmas any more, there's always a Snowman (C4) on television. Turning up for around the 20th time, the Raymond Briggs cartoon is reduced this time to publicising a change in the credits: for yuletide 2002, chorister Paul Auty will finally get a name-check. As only telly anoraks have so far known, Aled Jones's single was a cover version.

Even so, it's a measure of how repetitive Christmas telly is that the most newsworthy event is a minor detail in the closing moments of a show which has not only been on TV for ever but which millions of the audience now own on video.

While the legend is that the companies hold back their very best for late December (a theory which helps them to explain boring autumns), the truth is that the seasonal schedules depend horribly on repeats. BBC2 has got **White Christmas** on the main day of the festivities, followed by a repeat of an American documentary about Bing Crosby.

Channel 5, which likes to be credited with new thinking, has gone for retro-1977, with **The Morecambe & Wise Show** as its peak-time offering on Christmas Day. Not only is the show unoriginal but so is the retrospective scheduling of it. The trick has been used by both BBC2 and ITV in the past. Although they never added reruns of **Tommy Cooper's Christmas** and **The Dame Edna Christmas Experience** as well.

One useful way of looking at the Christmas and new year programming is as a kind of Christmas card list, showing who's in and out with the controllers. Bad news, then, for Chris Tarrant, as **Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?** (ITV), a plum of the schedules in recent years, is now just trimmings, relegated to the 11.15pm slot. This year's BBC1 reward-commissions go to **Alistair McGowan** and **Bargain Hunt**, which are both gifted Christmas Day slots.

It may be revealing of a general lack of inspiration, though, that **Absolutely Fabulous** and **French and Saunders**, formats associated with Christmases past, have both been tinselled again this year, as has **Only Fools And Horses**, although its last seasonal specials were generally felt to have stretched the material a bit thin.

The drama's pretty backward-looking too, with remakes of **Pollyanna**, **Goodbye Mr Chips** and **The Hound Of The Baskervilles**. Classic stories are often worth another version but there's a dreary feeling that, like certain manufacturers of soap and shortbread, we're being given a nostalgic fantasy of a TV Christmas which never quite existed.

The oddest decision, probably made before Elizabeth II started her latest hobby of overturning trials involving royal servants, is BBC2's apparent intention to increase the quantity of the monarch from her usual 15-minute annual report to more than four hours on Christmas Day, with the screening that morning of all the episodes of **Queen And Country**, the factual quartet commissioned for the golden jubilee.

Apart from that, as usual, it's big movies: BBC1 has **American Beauty**, **Billy Elliot** and **Chicken Run**. Filling the screen with recent films is absolutely a Christmas television tradition but, as all three of this year's most-promoted showings were among the biggest-ever sellers on video and DVD, it's hard to see why they can be regarded as a big draw on the small-screen.

It's true that the very idea of Christmas, both as a religious and nutritional event, involves repeating what previous generations have done but, even by such standards, was there ever a previous TV Christmas in which absolutely everything was either a repeat, a remake or a chance to see again something you'd already watched on DVD?

Oh, and don't worry. There is room for a profile of the founder of a Christian religion: Henry VIII, profiled by David Starkey on Christmas Eve. As for baby Jesus, he has to make do with a couple of televised church services.

'Remote-Controller'

MEDIA NEWS

BACK in October the BBC's head of news Richard Sambrook emailed staff to say that "we will need to make savings next year" and "voluntary redundancy" was now an option. But so few staffers have taken up the offer, the deadline has now been extended by ten days.

"I hope then to come back to you with more information about the next steps," says Sambrook.

The BBC still denies the savings are in response to a widely reported "financial black hole", but those "next steps" are likely to be painful. How soon will the cost-cutters notice how pointless the BBC's breakfast telly has become?

PS: In what may be a fatal blow to Greg Dyke's "Cut The Crap" initiative, two "installation artists", aka Dig Ding Dong, have been commissioned by the BBC in White City to investigate "the ghosts that may also occupy the site" using "paranormal equipment". Thank you licence payers.

DUMB BRITAIN

Family Fortunes, ITV

Andy Collins: Name a famous historical heroine.

Contestant: Winston Churchill.

Fifteen-To-One, C4

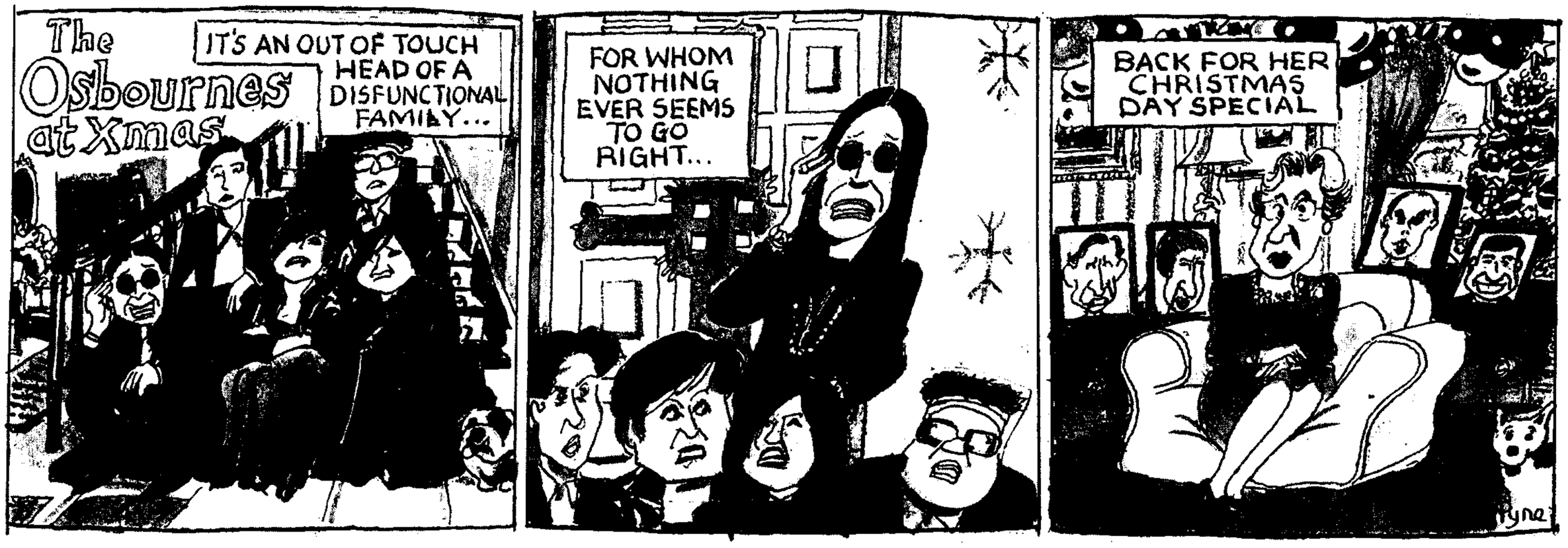
William G. Stewart: Which of the Queen's six grandchildren, described as "a blonde 5'5" knockout" was named this year by the American entertainment magazine *People* as one of the 50 most beautiful people in the world?

Contestant: Prince Edward.

Steve Wright's Big Quiz, Radio 2

Steve Wright: In 1863 which American President gave the Gettysburg Address?

Contestant: I don't know, it was before I was born.


The Osbournes at Xmas
IT'S AN OUT OF TOUCH HEAD OF A DISFUNCTIONAL FAMILY...
FOR WHOM NOTHING EVER SEEMS TO GO RIGHT...
BACK FOR HER CHRISTMAS DAY SPECIAL
Tyne

SPURRED into action by October's *Panorama* exposé of corruption in the Sport of Kings, the Jockey Club ruled on 29 November that former jockey Graham Bradley is to be "warned off" all racecourses for eight years.

Bradley, who was found guilty on six counts of breaking Jockey Club rules, including passing on information for money and lying over his involvement with drug trafficker Brian "The Milkman" Wright, featured prominently in *Panorama*, at one point being collared by reporter Andy Davies at Newbury racecourse.

As Davies attempts to confront Bradley with evidence of his corruption, a steward is seen bustling the hack out of the way, while former royal jockey and current BBC racing reporter Willie Carson scuttles down the steps from the weighing room to offer words of encouragement to Bradley. "You handled that well – I couldn't save you," he tells him.

In the light of Bradley's fate it surely must be only a matter of time before BBC bosses inquire of Carson what, precisely, he knew that Bradley needed saving from.

"He's bringing glib tidings"

THE QUEST to make the BBC's pisspoor *News* at Six more "inclusive" continues apace. Reporters and presenters have already been ordered to use each other's first names as often as possible, and anything vaguely complex, "impersonal" or foreign has been excised from the schedule.

Now bosses are planning an exciting new tie-in with their forthcoming morning magazine show, brilliantly titled *The Morning Show*. Helmed by Nicki Chapman, ex-PR for the Spice Girls and *Pop Idol* judge, the show will be an hour-long mix of "current affairs and gossip", featuring Greg Dyke's new obsession, a phone-in opinion poll ("Greg is very keen on polls… they are accessible and they make a bit of extra cash", according to a producer) about a topic in the day's headlines. The results will be broadcast as part of the in-no-way dumbed-down *News* at Six!

BIRTSPEAK

BBC World becomes a separate limited company – BBC World Ltd – on Sunday 1st December. This development represents the final stage in the process of creating a new division encapsulating the BBC's international news offerings – BBC World television, BBC World Service radio and the BBC's international facing online news service www.bbcnews.com. There will be no change to what viewers see on screen as a result of this transfer.

— Message from Rupert Gavin to BBC Worldwide staff, 29 November.

AD NAUSEAM

WITH a full tobacco-advertising ban coming in February, more bans likely to follow (New Zealand is closing in on junk food ads) and no real sign of an end to the advertising recession, it looks as if the Grinch has stolen Christmas in adland again. But there could be happier times ahead for the boys in bow-ties if, as is widely speculated, Stephen Carter becomes director-general of the new super-regulatory body Ofcom.

A graduate at ad agency J Walter Thompson, Carter rose through the ranks to become md and then landed the top job at one of the agency's clients, NTL. His two-year tenure was an unqualified disaster: NTL went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, amassed £12bn of debt, saw subscriber numbers plummet and cut more than 8,000 jobs. Carter steps down at the end of the year.

Not only, then, is he an inveterate ad man where a consumer champion is required, but NTL's advertising record under his stewardship is noteworthy too: the ASA upheld no fewer than 15 separate complaints against the firm, repeatedly, branding their advertising misleading and contradictory. If it seems strange that a lifelong adman should allow his marketeers to break the rules so often, it's even stranger that he should be in the running to head the new communications regulatory body.

THIS SEASON'S most pressing vegetable-related question is whether or not the British sprout-growers association has been reading the *Eye*.

One of 1998's best-selling *Private Eye* Christmas cards pictured a peeved greengrocer trying to push sprout sales with a poster reading, "A sprout is for life, not just for Christmas".

And now we learn that the BSGA have begun a £100,000 campaign to boost the image of their sorry crop, also using the line "a sprout is for life, not just for Christmas". It forms part of a sprout-related onslaught that will include a sprout recipe book, sprout liqueurs and delicious sprout soup. On this occasion, in the true spirit of Christmas, it has been decided to let the matter rest.

O·B·N

Charles Saatchi's ex-wife has warned her successor Nigella Lawson that he's a man who gets crushes and loses interest easily. He's also a collector who has spent his life searching for the perfect piece of art and no doubt the perfect woman. He must be shrewd enough to know that he won't do better than Nigella.

LYNDA LEE-POTTER
Daily Mail
(Submitted by J. James)

£10 paid for entries put forward for the Order of the Brown Nose.

CHESS NEWS

RUMOURS are flying in the chess world about the outcome of the agreement between Brain Games Network Ltd, organisers of the World Chess Championship match in October 2000, and the beleaguered TV company Einstein Group plc (*Eye* 1047).

It now appears that Einstein has welched on part of an obligation to pay $400,000 in prize money to eight of the world's top chess players who took part in a tournament in Dortmund last July to determine who would challenge Vladimir Kramnik of Russia for the World Championship in 2003.

Brain Games was the original promoter of the Dortmund qualifying tournament; but after the deal with Einstein in January the Dortmund event and Kramnik's defence of his title both came under Einstein's aegis. With Brain Games' reputation in tatters the Dortmund players and organisers, not surprisingly, wanted to be certain the prize money would be paid by its successor.

Enter the chess-mad Madame Nahed Ojjeh, the widow of a billionaire, who has become an enthusiastic sponsor of her chess club in Paris and of various international chess tournaments. In May Madame Ojjeh announced that she was guaranteeing the Dortmund prize fund and so all was well. The tournament duly took place and was won by Peter Leko of Hungary, followed by a host of star players including England's leading Grandmaster Michael Adams. First prize was $160,000 and even last place was worth $15,000.

Alas! Although Madame Ojjeh did indeed fulfil her guarantee and sent the prize money to Einstein, not all of it has yet reached the players. One of them, the Bulgarian grandmaster Topalov, complained to the French grandmaster Joel Lautier, a member of Madame Ojjeh's club in Paris. Ojjeh was "furious" to learn that Einstein hadn't already dished out the loot: Topalov was paid shortly afterwards.

Meanwhile there has been another bizarre twist in the saga of Brain Games and Einstein. Since April, Einstein has been defending a winding-up petition launched in the companies' court by Raymond "The Penguin" Keene of Brain Games, which apparently concerns shares that Einstein had agreed to hand over in settlement of the purchase of Kramnik's contract. It appears that Einstein feel they were misled during the negotiations and therefore decided not to transfer most of the 36 million shares that represented the agreed purchase price. Court hearings have taken place in April, June, August, September and October, and the next was due at the high court in the Strand on 11 December. Given that Einstein's shares have been suspended from the Alternative Investment Market since 10 October at less than 1p, it is unclear what, if anything, the Penguin hopes to achieve by his legal action.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

SANTA'S GROTTO
WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE FOR CHRISTMAS LITTLE GIRL?
BOTOX, LIPOSUCTION, AND A BUM LIFT!
REALLY?.... DON'T YOU WANT ANYTHING SOFT AND CUDDLY?
OKAY...
...I'LL HAVE SOME BREAST IMPLANTS THEN!

SIGNAL FAILURES

Focus on Stagecoach

REMEMBER how Railtrack shareholders were bailed out by taxpayers? The same is now happening for an equally unlovely company: Stagecoach.

Under intense questioning by the transport select committee, Richard Bowker, chairman *and* chief executive of the strategic rail authority (SRA), has admitted that the desire to "stabilise" Stagecoach's share price was one reason the SRA hurriedly agreed a huge bailout for Virgin Rail in July (*Eyes passim*). (Stagecoach owns half of Virgin Rail, which formerly employed one Richard Bowker as its co-chairman.)

Bowker also told the MPs why Virgin Rail had to be kept in business when its ludicrous business plan for the west-coast line went belly up: changing operator "would cost more". But how did he know, without asking the likes of GNER and National Express to tender alternatives? Bowker also pleaded that Virgin was commissioning new trains – but the SRA has powers to switch train leases to a replacement franchisee.

Stagecoach was worth more than £3bn before it bought an American company, Coach USA, in 1999. Now it's worth about a tenth of that. Roger Bowker, father of Richard and a senior Stagecoach executive, was sent to sort out Coach USA but to little avail. On the day Stagecoach announced its disastrous results for 2001-02, Bowker jnr pulled a rabbit from the hat. He had rushed through the deal that freed Virgin Rail of its obligation to pay the exchequer about £1.5bn for its franchises and gave Virgin £106m extra pocket money for the rest of this year. News of this massive public handout was broken not by the SRA but by Stagecoach.

Bowker's heroic deed was noted both sides of the Atlantic: one Wall Street rating agency advised Stagecoach investors on 22 July that Virgin's two UK rail franchises had been renegotiated with "a less onerous subsidy profile". Stagecoach's interim results for this year, released last week, show its Virgin Rail stake generated a £7.7m profit, with income up 11 percent. Although Stagecoach suffered a £575m write-down at Coach USA, shares jumped more than 40 percent after the results.

The SRA's £29m payment last summer to Stagecoach's South West Trains franchise for work it had to carry out anyway (*Eye* 1061) also helped. And SWT's territory is to expand, when the SRA switches Waterloo-Bristol-Cardiff services to SWT from the better performing Wessex Trains. Could this be the same SRA that promised last month to strip business from under-performing train companies?

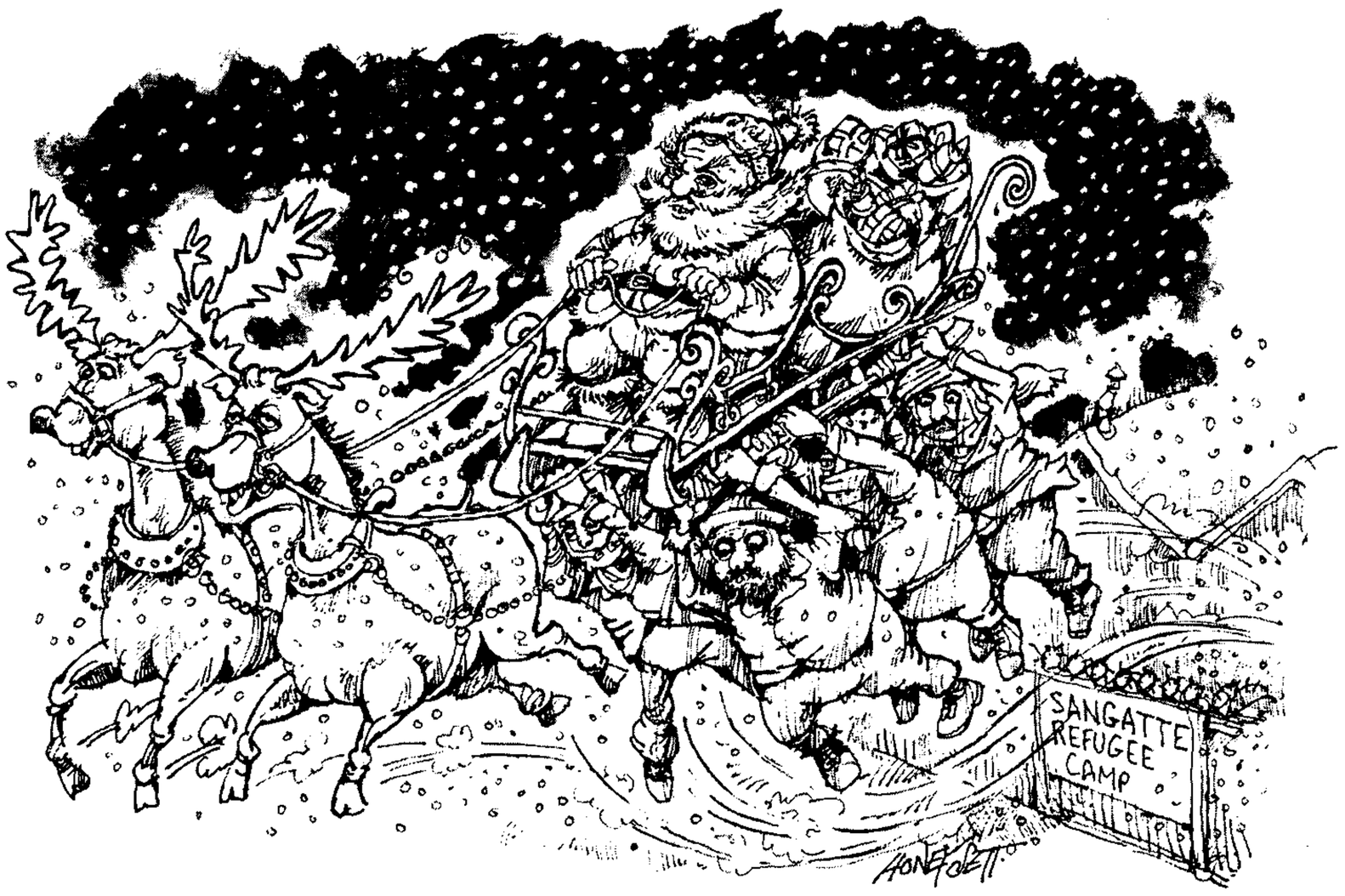
Nor will Stagecoach's stability be harmed by Bowker giving it a longer Isle of Wight franchise. Of all the franchises, Stagecoach's no-frills Island Line operation gets by far the highest subsidy per mile (up from 32.9p in 1999-2000 to 36.9p last year) — yet *no other company was invited to tender* for the new franchise. That's the third time the SRA has broken its rule of "addressing the cost pressures from train operations by refranchising, which will deliver best value through competition". And all three beneficiaries are companies Stagecoach wholly or partly owns.

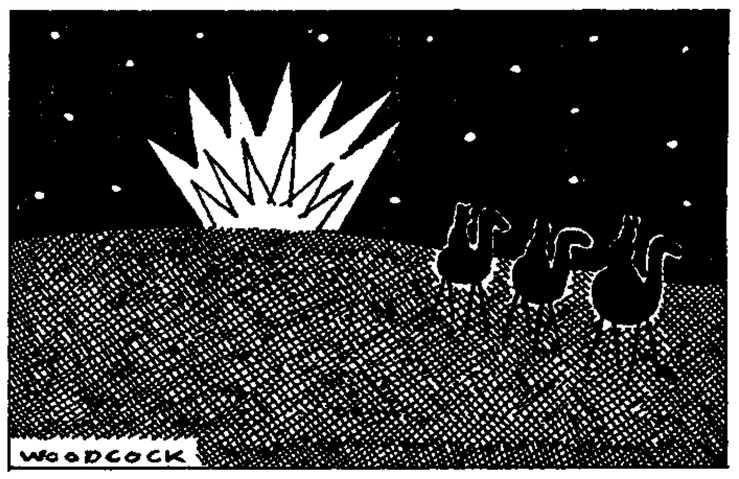
On the day of Stagecoach's dire results last week, Bowker stole the headlines, repeating his warning of a cash crisis: "We have to prove that we can manage costs effectively and... are providing value for money." He forgot to explain how his approach to Stagecoach and Virgin contributes to either of those aims.

Transport secretary Alistair Darling has agreed to the closed-shop Island Line deal, and by leaving Bowker as SRA chairman *and* chief executive (contravening the Greenbury rules on corporate governance) he has condoned the deal to "stabilise" Stagecoach's shares. Perhaps Darling could explain why it's so much in the public interest to ensure the survival of this arrogant company which used dirty tactics to force many bus operators off the road (*Eyes passim*), was fined a record £12.5m for SWT's poor service in 2001-02 and has even threatened to sue its own passengers (*Eye* 1009) for libel.

PS: One part of the railway which *has* controlled costs is the freight sector, which shoulders commercial risk instead of relying on state handouts. In the 10-year transport plan rail-freight was allocated £3.4bn for infrastructure upgrades – not much compared with the huge environmental and safety benefits of reducing lorry traffic. But last week Bowker said even that may not be available because so much cash is being gobbled up by badly planned and badly managed passenger activities (including most of the franchises and the Railtrack-Virgin west-coast mainline scheme). In a furious response, the Rail Freight Group cited the SRA's own "inability" to control costs and added: "Earlier this year, Bowker is reported to have told his staff 'Fit in or f... off'. Perhaps he should follow his own example."

'Dr B. Ching'





DOWN ON THE FARM

WITH more than £30m a year in funding at stake, researching the link between BSE and CJD has long been a lucrative industry for a small group of scientists. The only trouble is that, six years after the great BSE scare reached its peak in 1996, they still haven't come up with any proof of a link.

Gone are the heady days when *Newsnight* could get Professor John Pattison of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) to agree that we could soon be looking at 500,000 deaths from eating BSE-infected beef. Or when the *Observer* could chill readers' blood by running apocalyptic forecasts from the great Professor Richard Lacey that by 2015 the French would be slamming the doors of the Channel tunnel as Britons died of CJD in their millions.

And now, with the news that variant-CJD deaths are actually declining – from 28 in 2000 to only 15 this year – the evidence for a link with eating beef becomes more and more tenuous. And so the scientists have had to become ever more ingenious.

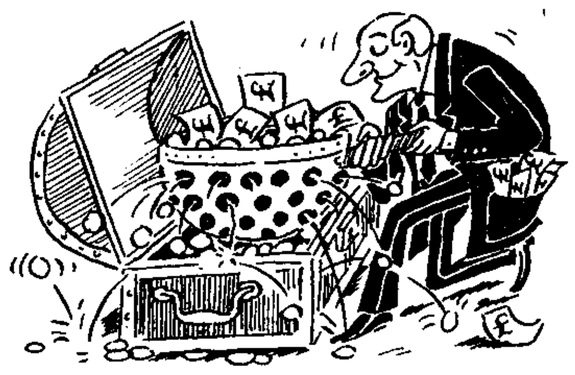
For a long time the front-runner in this game was Prof John Collinge of St Mary's, Paddington, who experimented by injecting the brains of genetically-modified mice with BSE prions. Regularly a new paper would appear claiming that his mice were looking seriously poorly, the unspoken subtext being that more money was needed to continue his vital research. But earlier this year it seemed Collinge was being outplayed at his own game by Prof Roy Anderson. Thanks to the patronage of his friend, Prof Sir John Krebs of the Food Standards Agency, Anderson and his Imperial College team were able to come up with a new study on what had long been Collinge's patch, claiming that sheep might well be just as susceptible to mad cow disease as, er, cows. If only more money could be spent on finding that elusive final scrap of evidence needed to prove the theory, we might have an excuse to kill all the 40 million sheep in Britain.

Two weeks ago Collinge hit back. Publicised by the *Daily Telegraph*'s science editor Dr Roger Highfield, Collinge claimed it may not just be the 119 cases of vCJD since 1994 that should be blamed on eating beef, but also the 588 cases of "sporadic" CJD recorded since 1990. Just why sporadic CJD, discovered in the 1920s, should suddenly be caused by BSE after 1990 but not before, is not entirely clear. But never mind. Such a dramatic 400 percent boost in the number of "BSE deaths" was surely enough, suggested Collinge, to justify a massive new research programme based on screening everyone's tonsils.

This was immediately supported by his American ally, Prof Stan Prusiner, who has developed a new test for CJD which he now suggests should be used on every person in Britain. This might be healthy for Prof Stan's bank account. But the fact remained that even 588 was still short of those hundreds of thousands of deaths confidently predicted by the scientists only six years ago.

'Muckspreader'

ROTTEN BOROUGHS



WIRE WE WAITING?

EAST SUSSEX county council is still prevaricating about removing obstructions blocking a public footpath across the estate of jailed millionaire Nicholas Van Hoogstraten, now serving 10 years for his part in the killing of a business rival.

Last month the appeal court quashed a plan by the council to divert the path (*Eye* 1060) rather than remove the old fridges and barbed wire with which it was blocked to deter ramblers, whom Hoogstraten terms "scum of the earth". The former Lib-Dem, now Tory, council's willingness to appease Hoogstraten may in part be explained by its former deputy leader's admission on the *Today* programme two years ago that "a number of local government officers... are frightened to death of him".

The appeal court decision was a victory for Kate Ashbrook, secretary of the open spaces society, who brought the case on behalf of walkers everywhere. Last week the *Eye* asked ESCC if the obstructions had been removed. The council replied: "The court did not order us to remove the obstructions, it ordered us to reconsider, and we are doing that. Another factor is that Hoogstraten's company Rarebargain [which owned the land] is in liquidation. We must take the official receiver's view into account before we do anything."

So the *Eye* asked for the official receiver's office for its view. We had a feeling it wouldn't be: "Ramblers are scum and perverts. The barbed wire stays!" It was: "Clearing the footpath is a priority." Glad to have sorted that out.

PS: East Sussex's officers (councillors have kept out of the matter) have proved extraordinarily willing to spend council taxpayers' money appeasing Hoogstraten — £25,000 so far in court fighting Ms Ashbrook this year, which may be followed by another £50,000-plus if she is awarded costs. How much cheaper it would have been to clear the path.

● **BRASS-NECK alert! If you were a council tenant facing the transfer of your home to a housing association, would you want your interests represented by a fraudster recently emerged from prison? Perhaps not; but that's what tenants in Peterborough are lumbered with in the person of councillor Gul Nawaz, who came blinking into the sunlight in October after serving one month of a two-month stretch for a £3,000 housing benefit fraud. Nawaz's Tory colleagues have put him on the "shadow board" of a new housing association, which they hope will take 11,000 homes, an annual £500,000 deficit and a £40m repairs backlog off their hands — if tenants vote in favour. Two months inside is not long enough for a councillor to be automatically disqualified, but the Tories' keen support for law and order, one might think, would at least have led to withdrawal of the whip. But with a majority of just three, Peterbore Tories can't afford to lose anyone.**

HAMLETS CIGARS

"STEEPED in history, with an elegance all of its own." That's the Sopwell House hotel, country club and spa in St Albans, where 80 head teachers and education bigwigs employed by Labour's Tower Hamlets council got into training for the festive season with a gourmet meal and overnight stay last month. Or took part in "strenuous team building exercises" anyway. The £27,700 came not from council taxpayers but from the schools budget provided by the department for education and skills.

Replete with tartlets of monkfish & coriander in a spicy tomato sauce and individual beef Wellingtons in port wine *jus*, the bigwigs sampled the extensive wine list (Chateau Haut Brion '83 a snip at £190) before relaxing in the club's spa and sleeping the sleep of the strenuous team-builder in the "luxury" bedrooms ("many with four-poster beds"). Meanwhile the impoverished old and needy of Tower Hamlets, one of Britain's poorest boroughs, are hoping for an improvement in their meals-on-wheels service. It's not provided by social services, as elsewhere, but by the £346-a-head gourmands of the education department.

WIFE'S A BEACH

OCTOGENARIAN whistleblower John Wortham stunned an Isle of Wight council meeting in May when he alleged, from the public gallery, that a six-year £800,000 beach cleaning contract had been awarded to a firm managed by the husband of the IoW council official whose job it is to allocate such contracts.

Three months later an internal inquiry deemed there had been no "bad faith" by contracts manager Tricia Stillman and her boss, Adrian Niemec, in allowing Mrs Stillman's husband, Roger, to win the contract on behalf of the Coastline Cleaning Company. Unspecified "disciplinary action" was said to have been taken. No one was sacked.

County Hall evidently expected the public to believe that a person in Mrs Stillman's position was unaware of the words "sleaze" and "declaration of interest". The best excuse offered was that staff were "working under pressure". It was all dismissed in a letter to Wortham by the council's chief legal officer, Mike Fisher, as "a most regrettable incident".

Alas the matter may not be closed after all. Wortham and another campaigner have now given statements to fraud squad officers — known amusingly on the island as "Knacker of the Yar", after a local river.

TEMPLES OF DOOM

LAST ISSUE we wrote about Malcolm and Wendy Temple, the husband and wife team hoping to bring even-handedness to Tory Monmouthshire county council's proposed council house stock transfer, with Beha Williams Norman (BWN), the firm of consultants of which he is a director, advising the council, and Heart of England, of which she is chief exec, acting as "independent advisers" for the tenants.

Unfortunately nobody thought to tell the tenants of this cosy connection. Mal and Wend's experience of teamwork in housing stock transfers goes back to 1988, when they were respectively chief finance and chief housing officers at Salisbury district council in Wiltshire. At the time they were married, but not to each other. They set up a housing association called Chequer, which attempted to take 7,800 council houses off the authority's hands. Their financial adviser was one John Beha, with whom Malcolm Temple now works at BWN.

Alas Salisbury's tenants voted against the transfer. The couple both quit their jobs, got married and set up in business together. And lived happily ever after, dishing out impartial advice to councils and tenants alike.

● **WHEN the binmen forgot to pick up a black sack of rubbish outside Penny Lynch's house in Beverley she phoned to inform East Riding of Yorkshire council (Eryc). She was told to leave the bag on the grass verge and someone would be round to get it. No one did collect the bag, but it was spotted by Eryc's crack anti fly-tipping unit, which dispatched two sleuths to rootle through the contents, Benjy Pell-style. Miss Lynch then received a letter informing her that she could be fined up to £20,000 or jailed for six months for the offence of illegally dumping rubbish and was ordered to present herself at council offices to be interviewed "under caution". Fortunately her local councillor, Bryan Pearson, was able to sort the matter out and extract a grudging apology from "deaf" Eryc. An example of joined-up thinking to cherish!**

EDUCASHUN NEWZ

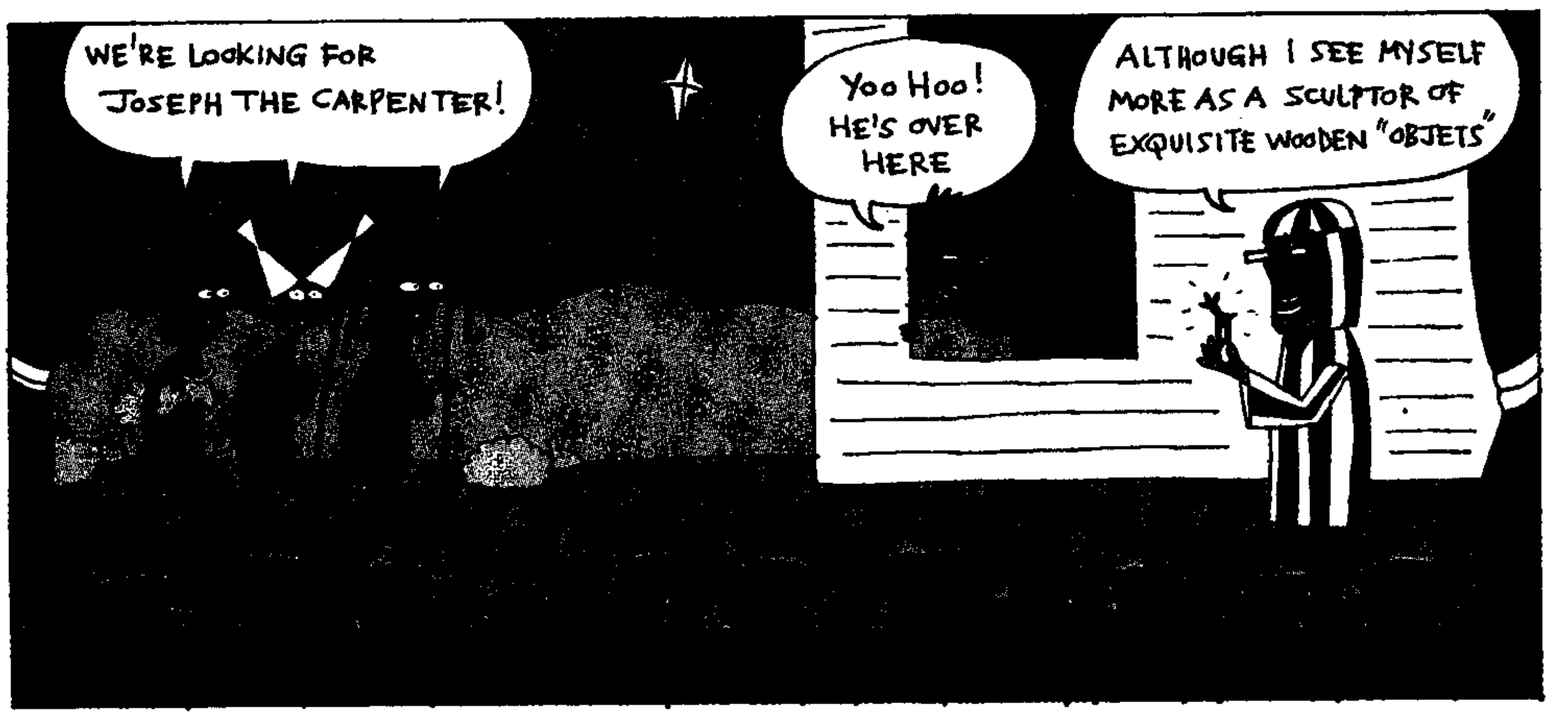
THE financial plight of engineering firm W.S. Atkins is not just bad news for its shareholders but also for the children of Southwark, who since April 2001, when Atkins took over the council's 104 schools, have endured a deteriorating service beset by resignations, redundancies, low morale and the worst primary school performance in England.

In August Atkins Education announced the resignation of two top directors. In September a recruitment freeze was implemented. In October a review recommended 20 redundancies among education support staff. Utility companies, fed-up with non-payment, demanded money up-front to provide gas and electricity to the firm's Southwark offices.

Unions discovered that for a year Atkins had been deducting money from the pay of teachers who had opted to top-up their pensions — but had not passed it on to the pension provider. Then the parent company's share price collapsed when its debts soared to £120m, following the introduction of a disastrous new IT system. The crowning glory came last week, with the publication of the national league tables for primary schools. Southwark obtained the lowest scores in England.

No doubt Atkins will similarly cover itself with glory when, as PPP "partner", it gets its hands on... London Underground!

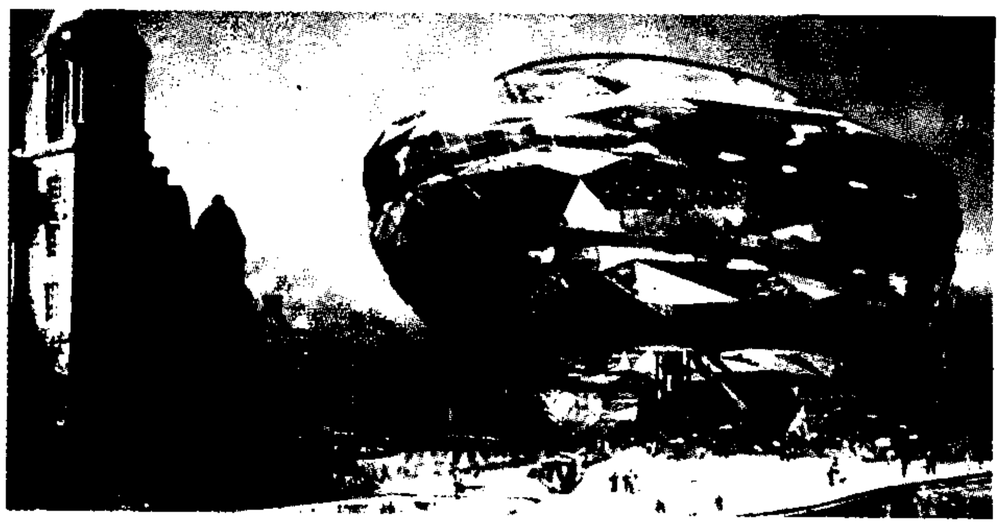
+GRIM NATIVITY+ KNIFE & PACKER


WE'RE LOOKING FOR JOSEPH THE CARPENTER!
YOO HOO! HE'S OVER HERE
ALTHOUGH I SEE MYSELF MORE AS A SCULPTOR OF EXQUISITE WOODEN "OBJETS"

NOOKS and CORNERS

"BUGGER BILBAO", as George V might have said. When will they learn? As I have reported before, Liverpool is desperate to be chosen as European city of culture in 2008. Rather than rely on the city's existing remarkable architecture and its magnificent art galleries and museums, the city fathers seem to think something new and "exciting" is required. So Liverpool city council, abetted by the north west economic development agency, is seeking to replicate the Bilbao Effect; that is, to build a whizzy building designed by Frank Gehry or some other international superstar, to attract millions of visitors.

It seems not to have occurred to them that almost every big city in Europe is trying the same wheeze, and that, if they all acquire a photogenic, well-publicised monument like the Guggenheim museum, any advantage is lost. Besides, some



exciting forward-looking masterpieces turn out to be turkeys: remember the national centre for popular music in Sheffield, let alone the accursed dome?

Undaunted, Liverpool proposes to build a "fourth grace" by the Mersey. The existing three graces are the three Edwardian classical buildings which dominate Pierhead: the Liver Building, the Cunard Building and the Mersey Docks & Harbour Board. As this group – like Canova's trio – is complete in itself, the very idea of a fourth grace is an absurdity, if not a blasphemy. Needless to say, the flashy tarts on offer pay no respect to the existing ageing beauties – neither in style, nor scale, nor materials, nor purpose. The sheer crudeness of Liverpool's opportunistic thinking is demonstrated by the selected short list of contenders for the job, for it largely consisted of the usual suspects. Surprise, surprise: Norman Foster (67) was there, and Richard Rogers (69). The winner was that modish, boorish recent recipient of the Stirling Prize, Will Alsop (55). There was never any chance of a brilliant outsider being commissioned – as Harvey Lonsdale Elmes was with the city's St George's Hall at the age of 25, or Giles Gilbert Scott with the Anglican cathedral at 22.

The designs by all these internationally acclaimed, prize-winning, exciting, brilliant, etc., etc., superstars for a combination of flats, offices, hotels, museum and a conference centre naturally succeed in dwarfing both the three graces and the noble, utilitarian Albert dock – the focus and key to the regeneration of the area. Milord Rogers offered two tall towers plus a wobbly-roofed hall, cleverly managing to combine his happily defunct proposal for the South Bank in London with his Rome congress centre competition entry. My Lord Foster proposed a triangular glass skyscraper which arrogantly challenged the great tower of the Anglican cathedral. In front, lurching across the site and sticking out over the river, would have been a huge boat-shaped glass block apparently inspired by a retired millionaire's gin palace. In the end the judges of Liverpool Vision, the city's regeneration company, plumped for Alsop's "Cloud": a proposal that looks like a piece of scrunched up Christmas wrapping paper on stilts … "like a cloud coming over the hill [it] represents the 21st Century – bold, innovative, pioneering" [*sic*]. The design is flashy, vulgar, incoherent and, if built, will trivialise the magnificent waterfront buildings which make Liverpool so special. Still, it will only cost £225m.

MEANWHILE, Liverpool is getting rid of any excess historic buildings which might deflect visitors from appreciating its go-ahead character. We have already highlighted the attrition of Liverpool's Georgian terraces [Eye 1041], and this year's artistic Biennial was held in the 18th century RC church of St Peter – just before its demolition. The next victim is something rather different: the Littlewoods Building, the long white art deco pile which is a landmark when approaching the city from the east. It was built by the founder of football pools, John Moores, who did so much for Liverpool and who is now commemorated by John Moores University. Littlewoods has been sold, however, and the building is now redundant. Elsewhere, such similar big deco buildings as the Hoover factory in London and the Wills factory in Newcastle have found productive new uses. But this is Liverpool, and both the city council and the blinkered north west development agency are happy to see it demolished and replaced by a business park with "yet more… appalling B&Q-style shed architecture".

The quote is from local entrepreneur Wayne Colquhoun, who is campaigning to save the Littlewoods Building. He says it should be seen as an asset to the city, that it could house the Liverpool Biennial in 2004, and that it could be linked with revitalising the nearby Edge Hill railway station, one of the oldest in the world. But who wants imaginative ideas in a city of culture – when all you have to do is hire a superstar and spend millions to get yet another modern masterpiece which might, or might not, produce the Bilbao Effect?

'Piloti'

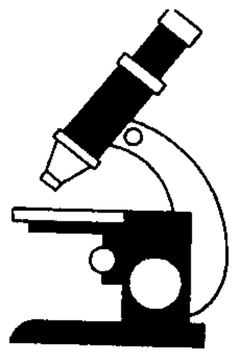
I-SPY

North Vancouver, Canada.

Submitted by J. Muter. £10 paid for similar submissions.

(SAE required for return of photographs. No transparencies.)

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE



THE premature death earlier this autumn of one of Britain's most engaging researchers, Zakaria Erzinclioglu (known to all as Dr Zak), means Britain's growing army of incompetent forensic scientists can sleep a little easier.

Dr Zak, who died aged 50, was one of the world's leading forensic entomologists. Specifically, he examined the maggots that infested corpses and was able, with great precision, to determine the time and, in some cases, place of death. His work was in great demand by police forces and he was involved in several high-profile cases.

To Dr Zak, though, the thought of rotting flesh crawling with maggots was only marginally less nauseating than what has happened to Britain's forensic science industry since it was effectively privatised by the Tories. Originally the Forensic Science Service was run as a unitary, nationalised and wholly-professional organisation. Each of the country's police forces paid pro rata for forensic work, depending on their size, and were then free to draw on its expertise.

The FSS employed qualified forensic scientists but also maintained lists of outside experts it could call upon if required. Thus it exercised some sort of quality control over any outside scientist who was drafted in where in-house expertise was lacking.

But when the FSS was given home office agency status in 1991, the field was thrown wide open. Police forces no longer had to pay a retainer and were free to shop around for forensic services. The predictable result, according to Dr Zak, was the creation of an entire industry based around charlatans and frauds.

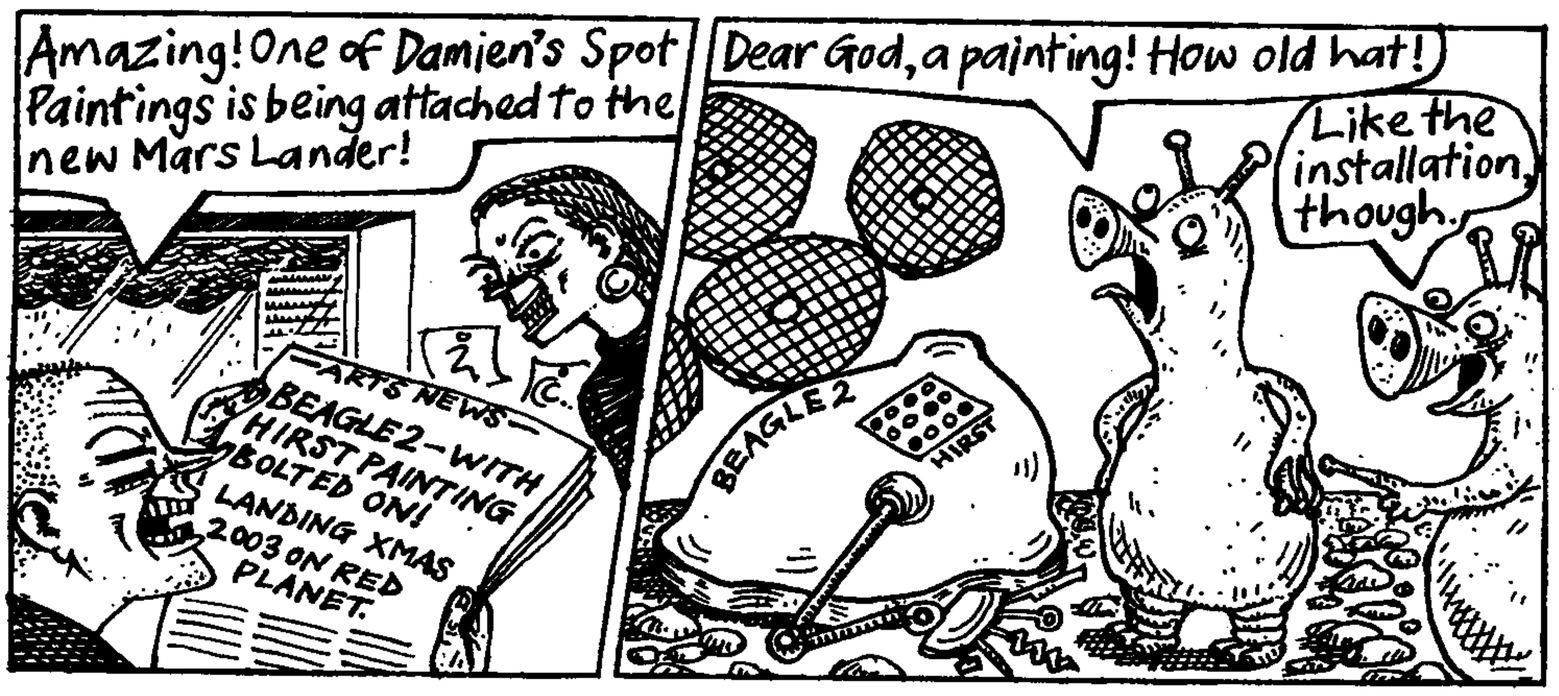
Forensic science labs sprang up across Britain offering ballistics experts, forensic psychology, chemists, engineers, DNA fingerprinters and more. Many of these experts are perfectly genuine and competent; but many more, according to Dr Zak and his colleagues, are little more than amateurs whose lack of expertise juries are wholly unqualified to judge. In many cases, he and his allies alleged, defence lawyers in particular would call in a known incompetent just to "muddy the waters" and confuse the jury.

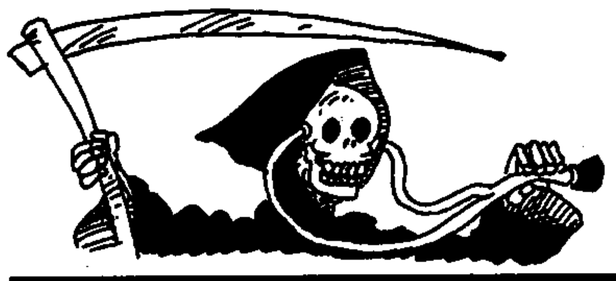
Two years ago, in a belated response to the forensic science crisis, Jack Straw, then home secretary, created the Council for the Registration of Forensic Practitioners (the CRFP), and stuck it in impressive offices in Tavistock Square in central London. This was meant to give the impression that the government was taking the forensic science shambles in hand, and that the newly-privatised industry was to feel the firm smack of nationalised regulation.

Alas, like the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), which was supposed to bring the railroad cowboys to heel, the CRFP has turned out to be a pastiche of a proper, nationalised authority. On its creation, its new chief executive Alan Kershaw publicly declared that he was not concerned with "cleaning out dirty stables". According to one senior forensic scientist and a long-time ally of Dr Zak's in his fight against the fraudsters, "the CRFP is a toothless tiger a typical piece of Blair window dressing".

'Boffin'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS BY BIRCH


Amazing! One of Damien's Spot Paintings is being attached to the new Mars Lander!
ARTS NEWS—
BEAGLE2—WITH HIRST PAINTING BOLTED ON!
LANDING XMAS 2003 ON RED PLANET.
Dear God, a painting! How old hat!
Like the installation, though.
BEAGLE2
HIRST



DOING THE ROUNDS

FOR ALL the money being piled into the NHS, staff vacancies remain as high as ever. London alone has 2,750 long-term vacancies in nursing and midwifery, with staff turnover in some inner London trusts touching 40 percent.

Applications for GP posts across the UK have halved in the last two years; and although the government and the British Medical Association (BMA) differ as to the number of new GPs needed to deliver the NHS plan (2,000 vs. 10,000), last year saw the equivalent of just 18 full-time GPs recruited. As the NHS confederation vice-chair Trevor Campbell Davis put it: "By the next election, there is a real possibility we may not have a provider NHS in its present form."

A further manpower problem is created by suspensions. If funding for the plethora of new bodies and assessment procedures to root out poorly performing doctors is not met with equal funding to rehabilitate those who are burnt out, depressed or addicted, the NHS will lose even more staff. The GMC in particular has been stung so badly by missing a whole succession of major scandals that doctors in distress are now more likely to be chopped off at the knees and kicked on to the scrap heap to avoid another scandal, than helped back into practice. Perhaps the BMA, fast becoming a laughing stock in the government and among the profession for its dismal handling of the consultants' contract negotiations, should stump up the cash to help rehabilitate problem doctors. After all, sacked doctors can't pay their subs and the BMA needs all the members it can get.

IN THE "new" Labour patient-centred NHS, even the most trivial gripe must be recorded on a critical incident form, investigated thoroughly and responded to. A fine example of this hugely wasteful overkill comes from a consultant at South Devon HealthCare Trust.

"Our business manager has spent the whole morning working on a reply to a 3 page letter of complaint from a patient. Issues included feeling a little weak when being kept starved for a surgical procedure and being given too much analgesia (oral, self-administered) after discharge home. The clinical problem? Dog bite to finger. Why on earth, instead of having to take up valuable senior managerial time on this bollocks, can't we fine people for wasting time, just like the police do?"

● DON MARQUIS, chief executive of East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey primary care trust, has been jailed for 18 months for fiddling his car expenses to the tune of £40,000 when working for Surrey Oaklands trust between 1996 and 2002. In 1998 he was appointed acting chief executive of the Lifecare trust (subsequently taken over by Oaklands) to oversee allegations of… um… fraud.

M.D.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

HOW seriously the European Commission takes fraud and the need for financial transparency and reform can be judged by its treatment of Marta Andreasen, the former chief accounting officer who uncovered a range of problems in the EU's accounting system.

First she was suspended for going public with her findings (she'd met a brick wall internally); now she is being subjected to a draconian gagging order while facing disciplinary proceedings.

Andreasen is not the only one to be appalled at the commission's lack of control over the EU's 98 billion euro annual budget. She refused to sign off the accounts for 2001; and the official court of auditors, for the eighth year running, has also just refused to sign off the accounts. Nevertheless the commission, and the so-called reformer Neil Kinnock, are doing all they can to silence Andreasen, who made the mistake of saying in public that the EU's accountancy practices would shame an ice cream parlour.

Andreasen, who is accused of not respecting obligations of discretion; not carrying out legitimate orders by her employers; and leaving her place of employment, is being interrogated behind closed doors. This is in "fairness to the parties involved", says Kinnock's spokesman, Eric Mamer. Andreasen might have preferred to have things in the open, but she is unable to confirm or deny that as the commission isn't allowing her to speak to the press. Legally Andreasen is at the first stage of a process that could lead to a full disciplinary hearing and eventually to the college of commissioners under Romano Prodi himself. Whatever the outcome – Andreasen wants her job back – it's going to take a while. And the accounting reforms Andreasen and others would like to see in place – which could expose all sorts of embarrassing examples covering road building and farm subsidies to name but two – seem as far away as ever.

PS: The last commission accountant to blow the whistle was Paul van Buytenen. Though his howls of protest eventually brought down the Santer commission, he ended up "counting lamp posts", as he put it, until he could stand the humiliation no longer and quit.

Number crunching

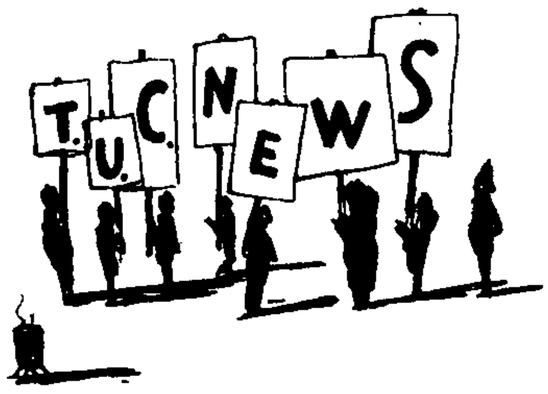
£4,000
■ total profits royal butlers were accused of having made from stolen goods

£2million
■ cost of their failed prosecutions

SPLIT personalities

Bob Moore

Sir Edmund Halle Berry



WHOEVER becomes general secretary of the GMB next May will have to deal urgently with a heap of problems left to fester under the leadership of John Edmonds. Top of the in-tray will be sorting out the acrimony in the regions that exists between GMB staff and their regional secretaries.

In Scotland morale is at an all-time low thanks to the antics of local boss Robert "Bolly" Parker, who until as recently as two weeks ago entertained hopes of taking over Edmonds' job. Alas the first three weeks of the employment tribunal (ET) of his former PA, Margaret McAvoy, pretty much put paid to that. In 1999, the tribunal heard, McAvoy resigned alleging that Parker had sexually harassed her for three years, leaving her feeling "like a battered housewife" (*Eye* 1004). The hearing has now been adjourned until March. After the adjournment Edmonds was told by the GMB's counsel, Ian Truscott QC, that although he didn't mind taking the union's money – £130,000 so far – maybe he (Edmonds) would like to consider whether it was well spent. Shortly after this conversation, on 29 November, Edmonds withdrew all financial support from Parker and ordered him to take an indefinite "holiday".

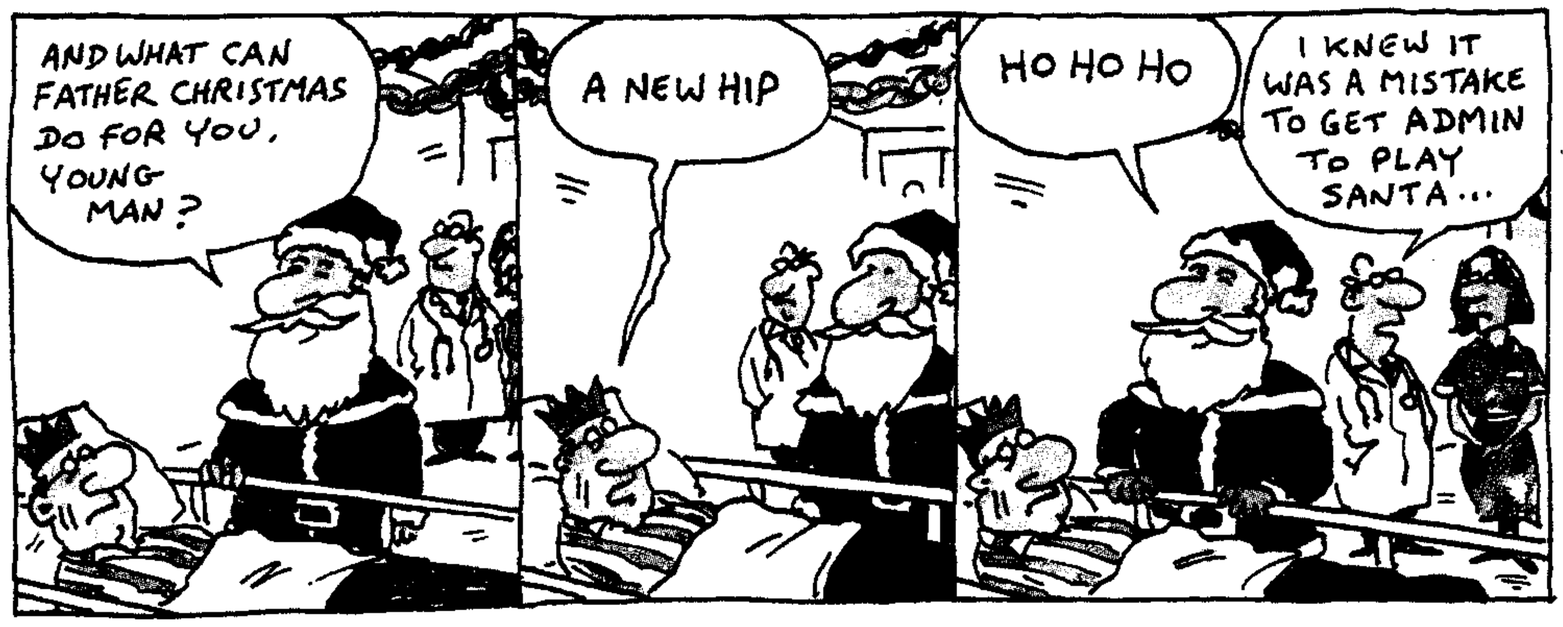
Meanwhile the GMB's Yorkshire and Derbyshire regional secretary Jerry "the thug" Nelson faces four ETs brought by GMB officers who have complained about his conduct. One case involves the treatment meted out to George Stupple, a GMB organiser in Yorkshire, who got into trouble with Nelson after he reported the findings of a stress audit he had been ordered to conduct by, er, Nelson. The audit found that 95 per cent of officers found it stressful dealing with… Nelson.

As well as making the GMB one big, happy family again, Edmonds's successor must make good the shortfall in the GMB's pension fund. The fund, administered by a 12-strong trustee board, including the general secretary, is in trouble after the board took a "contributions holiday" for several years, encouraged by soaring share prices. The subsequent stock market crash has led to a shortfall which will require the GMB to increase its contribution by at least six per cent or face the prospect of the fund not being able to meet its commitments. Happy days!

'Blackleg'

off your trolley

REEVE & WAY



Letters

Private Eye

Lake side view

Sir,

Re: In the back (What the Butler Didn't See, 1068).

I act for Mr May in relation to his civil claim against the Met for wrongful arrest and false imprisonment. I write to correct a factual inaccuracy, which appeared in the body of the article. I did not make a formal complaint in a signed witness statement against Commander Yates as reported. It was my client.

I read the press reports on the cross-examination of DCI de Brunner on 22 October wherein it appeared that members of the royal family had been seriously misled by her and Yates.

The importance of this revelation to me was twofold. Firstly, that this misleading information may have caused the Prince of Wales to support a prosecution he would otherwise have refused to support. Secondly and much more importantly, whether the fact of a current investigation into Commander Yates for matters of perverting the course of justice had been disclosed to the defence. My strong suspicion was that it had not.

This explained why Commander Yates had not been served with official notice of the complaint. And still has not, 16 months later. Had he been, the Burrell defence would have been entitled to know.

By way of an update, DCS Milton has finalised his report and the recommendations are with DAC Hayman for a decision to be made. I have very little confidence in the process, as DAC Hayman was the officer in charge of the very department (The Anti-Corruption Squad) complained of at the relevant time. He is leaving to join Norfolk as its chief constable.

I finish by noting that another royal butler trial collapsed last week at the central criminal court. No prizes for guessing the identity of the officer in charge of this shambles.

I was however gratified that the Yard have organised an internal review of the failure of its Special Enquiry Team, which is going to report to Sir John personally. I will no doubt sleep more safely tonight in the knowledge that the results will not be made public.

Yours faithfully,
MARK LAKE,

Lake & Co.

Even more agog

Sir,

As a great fan of the Gogmagogs I was sorry to read of the problems they were having with their Arts Council-appointed, company-credit-card-wielding administrator (Eye 1067). Sorry, too, to read the letter from Jeremy Richardson denigrating their work (Eye 1068). Agog (ish) to learn of the close relationship between Mr Richardson and said credit-card-wielding administrator. Very bad smell indeed.

Sincerely,
DAVID RINTOUL,

Gielgud Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue.

Sir,

Contrary to what Kim Evans, Exec. Director of the Arts at The Arts Council of England stated in her letter (1068), the Gogmagogs did receive fixed term funding towards core costs for 1999-2000, replaced the following year by funds from a pilot for the music-theatre core funding scheme. Our board decided that we could not continue with the next stage of that scheme for reasons which were discussed with the Arts Council at a meeting which I attended, and which were touched upon by Lunchtime O'Boulez (Music and Musicians, 1067).

Yours sincerely,
JOHN BIRD,

Chairman, The Gogmagogs.

Sir,

Could someone perhaps point out to Jeremy Richardson that a cow with a "three foot penis" is more commonly known as a bull – and a lucky one at that.

I saw the Gogmagogs' Troy Town and thought it was good, if a little experimental and confusing at times.

TONY BROWN,

Soham, Cambs.

Lookalike

Brand

Sergeant

Sir,

"Have I Got News For You?" has finally solved the mystery. John Sergeant seems to bear an uncanny resemblance to Jo Brand without the wig. Or... Jo Brand bears an uncanny resemblance to John Sergeant WITH a wig! Are they in any way related?

PETER ARNOLD

Canterbury, Kent.

Well read

Sir,

I do hope I have misread the title of the box on the bottom left-hand corner of page 19 of the current issue. It would appear to say "Thought for the Gay" and thus make a link between homosexuality and paedophilia that has been discredited by all reputable research but nonetheless persists in some regions of the popular imagination. If so, it is something I would expect from the gutter press, not Private Eye.

Yours in annoyance,
GRAHAM REILLY,

Via email.

Scenes You Seldom See

"And don't forget to send one to that couple we met in Corfu fifteen years ago"

Rewriting his story?

Sir,

Your review of Pevsner on Art and Architecture (1068) shows no evidence that the book in question has been read. Your reviewer ignores what I have said and then fabricates a series of falsehoods to discredit me.

There is indeed evidence that Nikolaus Pevsner supported the Nazi Party, otherwise I would not have said so - duh. I even quote Pevsner talking eagerly about Hitler's political programme. Far from wilfully discarding empathy for "someone like Pevsner", I go out of my way to explain his circumstances and put them in context. I do not say, however, that Pevsner was a member of the party, as your reviewer suggests.

As for the idea that the Pevsner family commissioned a biography of Pevsner from me in 1983, this is ludicrously wrong, as is the claim that they "realised their mistake" and cancelled the agreement and that I am now having my revenge.

Your writer is lying or reporting lies or ignorant or mad or malicious, or all or some of the above.

STEPHEN GAMES,

Via email.

Kurt reply

Sir,

Your sneering reviewer of Kurt Cobain's Journals writes that Nirvana "scarcely survived its second album proper". As any fule know, Nirvana actually made three "proper" studio albums – viz, Bleach, Nevermind and In Utero – before Kurt shot his face off.

Yours grungily,
STEVEN POOLE,

London N1.

Turning over the Page

Sir,

Robin Page is the real Muckspreader. His dismal speech at the recent Cotswold Harvest Banquet was cringe making. He was meant to be witty, but instead droned on and on, leading himself in an incoherent ramble. This annual supper staged by the Cotswold Food Group is a gathering of local people and anyone interested in farming and local food. The contrast between Lord Plumb and Robin Page was stark. His lordship's journey through farming was enlightening to all. Page had no structure to his remarks and seemed ill prepared. All he talked about was farmers topping themselves.

Eventually to save everyone embarrassment, he has quietly asked to resume his place. What a relief.

Will an apology be forthcoming? Probably not. Page lives in his own world; best leave him there.

Cotswold Character
EDWARD DAWSON,

Via email.

Talent to offend

Sir,

I am writing to complain about the "invisible offensiveness" of various cartoons and other material in Private Eye: the sexism of the advert on page 2, the stereotypical students on page 6, the sexism of Supermodels on page 9, the concealed homophobia of It's Grim Up North London (the two main characters are clearly stereotypical gays), the racism of Geoff Thompson's cartoon on page 15, the nudge-nudge homophobia of Apparently on page 16 (bent = gay), the racism of one cartoon on page 19 and the sexism of another, the Islamophobia of the cartoon on page 20... Need I go on? Like Mr Peter Jennett in Eye 1068, I have no sense of humour whatsoever but buy Private Eye so I can find "invisible" prejudice that requires my "censure".

I may be wrong, but I imagine that Mr Jennett must make Peter Tatchell seem like Dale Winton. Odds on he has an MA in Queer Theory.

Yours faithfully,
D.F. KING,

St Albans.

Give criticism a chance

Sir,

I felt your criticism of the John Lennon documentary (Eye TV, 1069) was totally uncalled for and unfair. I thought Alan Davies did an excellent job presenting the case in a well put together programme. As for your description of Diana as a "dead Sloane", that's beyond cruel. She's in no position to answer back, so lay off.

Yours,
PETER MCGUIGAN

Co. Armagh, N. Ireland.

Modern Nativity Play

Barnet unfair

Sir,

As a long time supporter of Barnet FC and a keen fan of Private Eye I was extremely disappointed to read your misleading coverage of Barnet FC's freehold purchase from Barnet Council in Rotten Boroughs.

Since the election of a Conservative council in May 2002, there has been a continual campaign of misinformation, innuendo and spin against the club from the council, who have been resolutely opposed to the construction of a new stadium, much of it centring on a typing error in the freehold. I was disappointed to see that a magazine of the calibre of Private Eye was aiding and abetting this process.

Barnet FC is a small but much loved community asset which is locked in a struggle with a council administration who sought to whip up opposition against the club to gain a handful of votes in a marginal ward. We need all the help we can get in our fight for a new stadium, and the repetition of such innuendo does not help our cause.

Your article was incorrect in several areas. Firstly, it claimed the land was worth £5m. The current value of the land is a fraction of that sum because it is not de-designated from Green Belt. The only reason that de-designation has been mooted is to allow the club to develop the current site to league standard. Barnet FC's chairman has stated on several occasions that he would be perfectly willing for it to remain in Green Belt if Barnet FC secure a permanent home at South Underhill.

Secondly, the typing error only alters the distribution of the proceeds of the sale in one particular instance: that Barnet FC builds a new stadium in the borough, but then decides to abandon the borough within 10 years. If and only if this happens would the typing error have any effect at all. The probability of Barnet FC, having gone to the time, effort and expense of securing a new stadium, then abandoning it within a decade are extremely remote. Even in this instance, the council would only miss out on a 60 percent share of the proceeds. Taken together this situation is a long way from the club being "handed a piece of council land worth £5.7m to a businessman for just £10,000."

I am saddened that you appear to have been unwittingly used to defame the good name of Barnet FC and its chairman, and hope that you will investigate the real scandal: namely the shocking treatment of Barnet Football Club by its local authority.

Yours,
JOHN LEWIS,

Via email.

Sir,

I guess you have no conscience so this is probably a waste of time but your "story" on Barnet FC and their purchase of the freehold that the football club stands on, has done more damage than you can guess. At a time when the football club needs all the support it can get against a posturing Tory council run by the obnoxious and future London mayoral candidate Brian Coleman, that is seeking to destroy a club that has been in existence for 114 years, you print this nonsense – wholly inaccurate and as usual half the story.

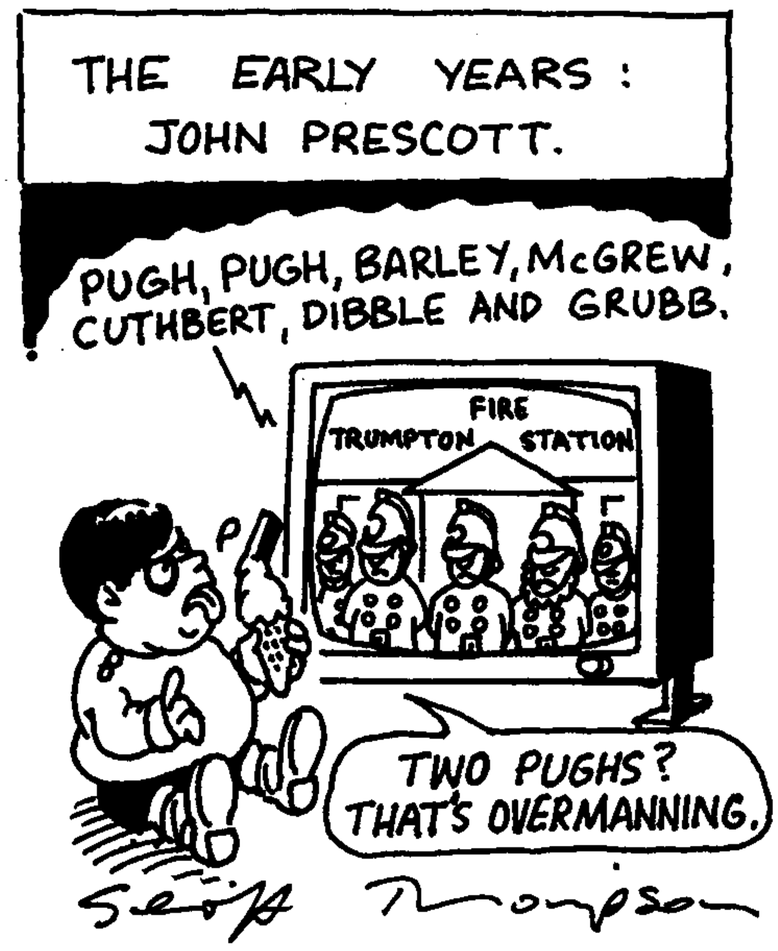
Others I'm sure will give you the FACTS but that I guess is of little interest to you.

Thanks for nothing...
STEVE WARNER,

Via email.

●Thanks for the large number of letters on this subject. There wasn't space to print them all. Ed.

Community Planning and Regeneration
Homophobic Harassment Co-ordinator
£10,281 - £10,960 for 18.5 hours per week
Council advertisement, Barnsley Chronicle


THE EARLY YEARS : JOHN PRESCOTT.
PUGH, PUGH, BARLEY, McGREW, CUTHBERT, DIBBLE AND GRUBB.
TRUMPTON FIRE STATION
TWO PUGHS? THAT'S OVERMANNING.
Steve Thompson

Goddess worship

Sir,

May we expect E. Jarvis Thribb to forsake the usual epitaph and pen some lines saluting the return of the still youthful Goddesses last seen when E.J. was a mere 17? I refer to the poem in Eye 421, written in 1978.

"So. Farewell/Then 'Green Goddesses'/Shall we/See you/Again sometime?"

Yours in anticipation,
MICHAEL STITT,

Co. Down, N. Ireland.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

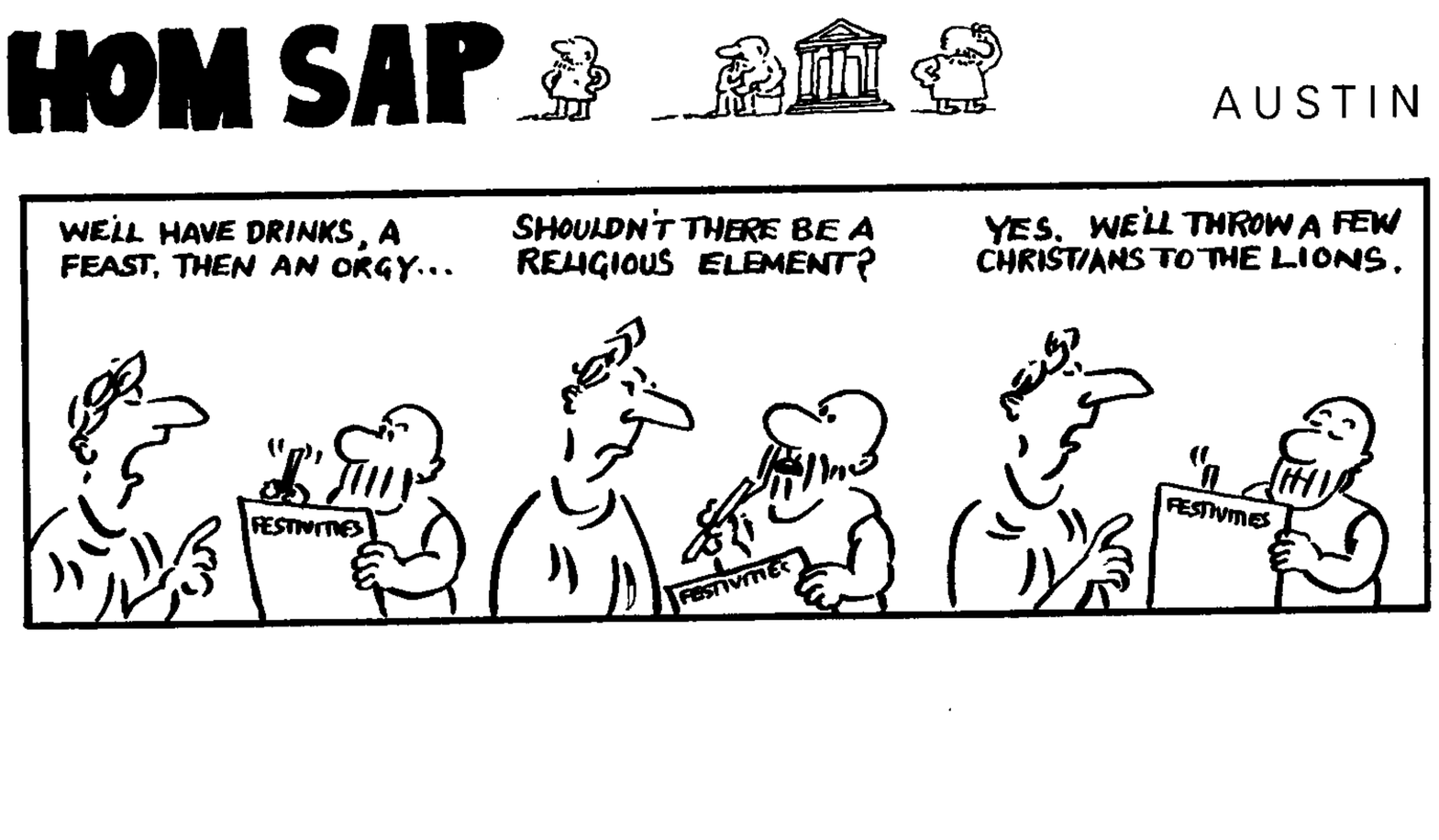
"An invisible hand stepped in and stopped the agreement."
BILL MORRIS, Radio 4
(Dafydd Williams)

"He [Martin O'Neill] was in a no-win situation, unless he won the match."
MURDO MACLEOD, Radio Scotland
(Valerie Scott)

"England need to pick players who do not have skeletons in their coffins."
IAN BOTHAM, SKY Sports
(Steve Sharpe)

"Batistuta, 3 of 4 of his goals have come from the substitute's bench."
MARTIN TYLER
(Toby Messer)

"They [Utd] seem to be in total, if not complete control."
JON CHAMPION
(Antony Crolla)


HOM SAP
AUSTIN
WE'LL HAVE DRINKS, A FEAST, THEN AN ORGY...
SHOULDN'T THERE BE A RELIGIOUS ELEMENT?
YES. WE'LL THROW A FEW CHRISTIANS TO THE LIONS.
FESTIVITIES
FESTIVITIES

Letter from **Israel**
from Our Own Correspondent

"TO the desert, friend," our Zionist grandparents used to sing as they danced around the kibbutz water tower two generations ago. Now some of us are singing the same song to the Palestinians. Where could be more suitable for such simple people than the arid Gaza Strip? Surely those still clinging tenaciously to the lusher, more fertile West Bank could be persuaded to join their refugee brethren there?

Of the Palestinians' slowness on the uptake there can be no doubt. More than 30 unarmed demonstrators were shot at the beginning of the current *Intifada* before they started shooting back. Now they are trying to catch up, but we still remain ahead. Since September 2000 we have managed to kill 2,037 of them, while they killed only 690 of ours (41,000 Palestinians have been wounded).

Some, of course, still haven't got the message, forcing us to pick more persuasive methods. If a place like Jenin with 70,000 inhabitants produces half a dozen suicide bombers, we make sure everyone pays. Not only do we wreck every building in the centre of town. We also build a wall and let nobody leave, not even for hospital.

Remind you of anything? Well, a few months ago our liberal daily *Ha'aretz* quoted an Israeli officer as saying: "It is right and essential to learn from every possible source... even, however shocking it may sound, from how the German army fought in the Warsaw ghetto."

It does sound shocking, but Labour used to be fine about such ideas, until it recently concluded that coalition rule with Likud prime minister Ariel Sharon played badly among its voters. So, after having kept the ageing bulldozer in power for 20 months, the "peace" party has at last pulled out – on financial grounds. Its ministers suddenly noticed Sharon was pouring money into the settlements at the expense of Israel's poor. Nothing to do with the Palestinians...

Facing electoral rout, Labour has even bitten the bullet and elected a new leader. Amram Mitzna is yet another general, but a pretty doveish one: he resigned his army command in 1982 in protest at the Lebanon war. Unlike Sharon, Mitzna wants to negotiate with the Palestinians right away, before they lay down their arms. He would also remove most, though not all settlements, for peace.

The Israeli public is unimpressed. Many believe that Israel is winning. After all, nearly half the West Bank is now controlled by its 400,000 settlers. Poor General Mitzna has his work cut out. Shocked that their own cities have become deadly places, when violent deaths were once confined to Palestinian towns, Israelis want radical solutions.

After hearing government ministers openly propose "transfer" in recent years, 46 percent are in favour of expelling all Palestinians. Israel's Russian immigrant daily, *Novosti*, has suggested that if Palestinian males were punished by castration, emigration might become a popular choice... Nor is "transfer" just on the planning board. One Palestinian village, Khirbet Yanoun near Hebron, has already been abandoned. Its electrical generator and water pipes had been repeatedly destroyed. Bethlehem has witnessed the emigration of more than 1,000 residents this year alone.

And if fairly explicit hints by the men closest to Sharon are anything to go by, such voluntary "transfer" is only the beginning: far more might be possible once America's war against Saddam Hussain has started and the world's media are preoccupied elsewhere. Anyway, says the PM, Israel's critics are nothing but anti-semites.

Most Jewish leaders in Britain have echoed Sharon's line and bravely condemned one particularly hostile recent statement. The purpose of Israel's current policy, so this said, was to "occupy, deport, destroy, blockade, kill, starve and humiliate an entire people". Embarrassingly, its authors proved to be not neo-Nazis but a group of 500, er, Israeli officers and soldiers refusing to serve in the West Bank.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "To fall over at a Pentecostal meeting is not merely a probability," prosecution barrister Robert Toner told the District Court in Sydney, "it is an anticipation. People are actively encouraged to speak in the tongues, and then fall, and each prayee should therefore have a catcher, because they are vulnerable. We maintain that the Sydney Christian Life Centre was negligent, because it did not provide someone to catch my client when she was slain in the spirit. And we are therefore claiming $750,000 in damages."

Toner was speaking on behalf of Lorraine Daly, a forty-year-old woman who had struck her head on the floor of the Assembly of God church, after being slain in the spirit during a service. But lawyers for the church argued that the claim was unreasonable. "Ms Daly's fall was premature," defence barrister Brendan Hull told the court, "because Pastor Hall had not yet reached her in the praying queue when she was slain. It is simply unrealistic to expect a church that attracts a thousand people to its services each week to provide a skilled catcher for each of them, just in case they are slain ahead of time. We have an experienced catcher who accompanies the pastor, and that works fine, so long as people are slain in the spirit at the correct moment."

Passing judgement, Justice James Black decided that "anyone, anywhere, at any time, might suddenly be filled with the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour, then fall and injure themselves. But it is not normal for people to fall before they are individually prayed for, so I find that the defendants were not negligent. Case dismissed." *(Sydney Morning Herald, 19 /10/02. Spotter: Charles Stokes)*

—●—

● *"Competitive eating is among the most diverse, dynamic, and demanding sports in history. It dates back to the earliest days of mankind, and stands alongside original athletic pursuits such as running, jumping, and throwing. But it is only during the past two centuries that the sport has been practised with greater organisation and formality.*

The Japanese culture has long been known for its reverence of competitive eaters, and continues to celebrate the accomplishments of men such as Takeru Kobayashi and Kazutoyo Arai, who have distinguished themselves at the table, in traditional rice and fish contests, as well as in international hot dog events. In the United States, competitive eaters were dominant sporting figures in the early twentieth century, and over the past decade the discipline has again risen in popularity. It is impossible to overstate the contribution of American eaters such as Ed Krachie, who ate 22 hot dogs and buns on 4 July 1996, and helped keep the US eating mantle high during the 1990s, despite the ever-increasing challenge from the Pacific rim.

"The International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE) supervises and regulates eating contests in their various forms throughout the world. IFOCE helps to ensure that the sport remains safe, while also seeking to achieve objectives consistent with the public interest: namely, creating an environment in which fans may enjoy the display of competitive eating skill. The premier event in the IFOCE calendar is the Nathan's Famous Fourth of July Hot Dog Eating Contest, which stands as the de facto Olympics of the sport, and as a litmus test of patriotism for eaters of all nations. IFOCE maintains offices at 151 West 25 Street, Fourth Floor, New York." (IFOCE newsletter, November 2002. Spotter: Anthony Shelton)

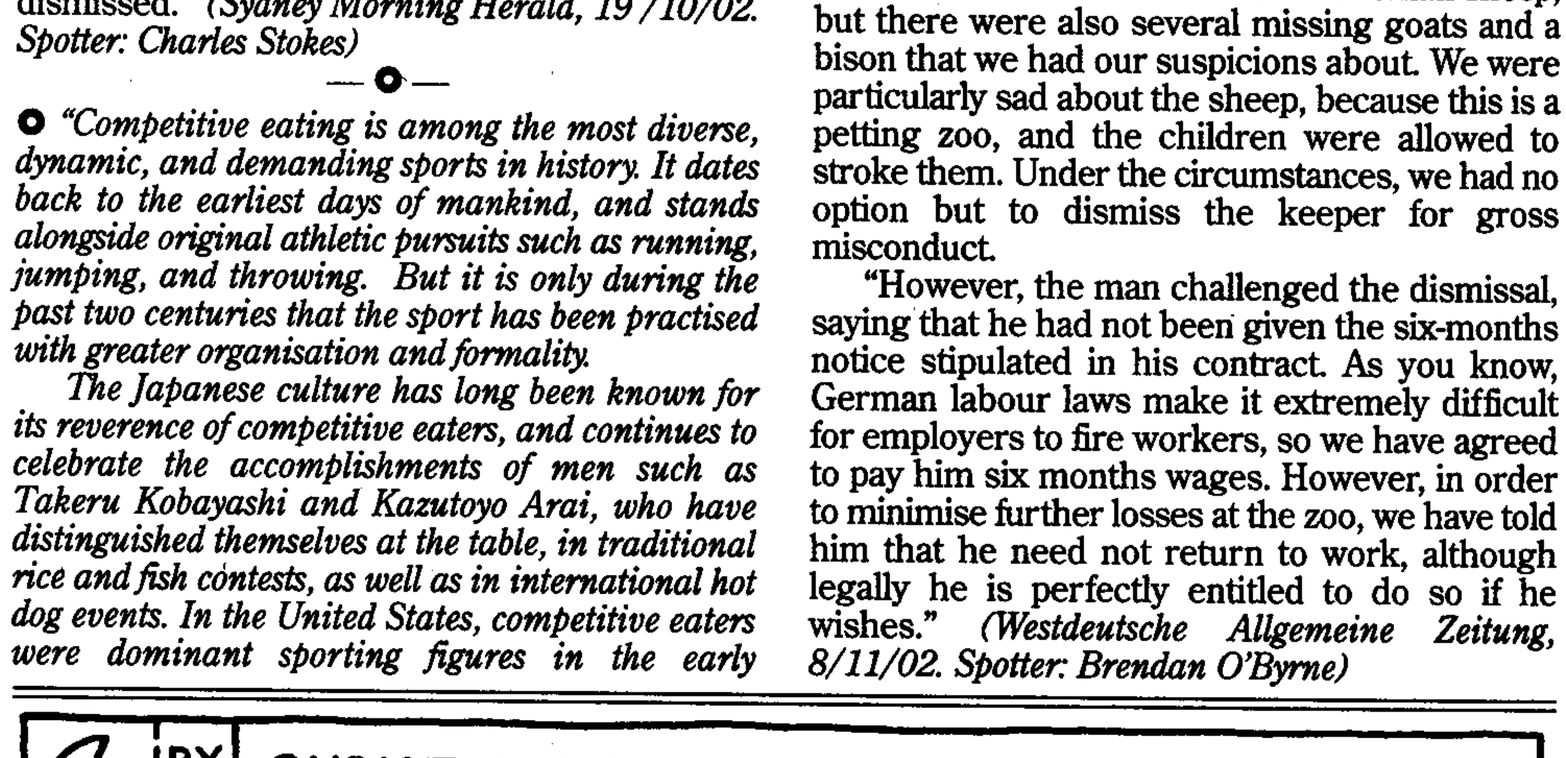
—●—

● "After the first dozen animals had disappeared from the zoo, the authorities decided to interview the keeper," a spokesman for Recklinghausen town council told reporters in Cologne, "and when challenged about the missing animals, he freely admitted that he had been eating them. He confessed to having barbecued five Tibetan

mountain chickens and two Cameroonian sheep, but there were also several missing goats and a bison that we had our suspicions about. We were particularly sad about the sheep, because this is a petting zoo, and the children were allowed to stroke them. Under the circumstances, we had no option but to dismiss the keeper for gross misconduct.

"However, the man challenged the dismissal, saying that he had not been given the six-months notice stipulated in his contract. As you know, German labour laws make it extremely difficult for employers to fire workers, so we have agreed to pay him six months wages. However, in order to minimise further losses at the zoo, we have told him that he need not return to work, although legally he is perfectly entitled to do so if he wishes." *(Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 8/11/02. Spotter: Brendan O'Byrne)*

apparently BY MIKE BARFIELD



Daily Cawdorgraph

1 groat

DOUBTS GROW OVER FIRST LADY

by Our Man at Number Thane *William Deedespeare*

THERE was mounting concern last night over the influence exercised by Lady Macbeth on her husband.

Unconfirmed reports have linked her name with a group of unsavoury characters, some of whom she has introduced to King McBlair.

Is This A Whopper I see Before Me?

They are said to include a group of three "lifestyle gurus" who have been trying to market a new slimming potion made from organic materials, including eyes of newt, spleen of toad and wing of bat.

One of the advisers claims that she can get in touch with the spirit world and there are even reports that seances have been held where the ghosts of the dead (Gordon Brownquo) have materialised.

Out out out

A spokesman for Lady McBlair told reporters, "The First Lady suffers from insomnia and needs help from professional sleep therapists. One of the proposed remedies to restore her mental balance is to go and wash her hands all the time."

Meanwhile, Alastair Campbell, the chief of the McSpin clan and a personal friend of King Macbeth's, has tried to distance the Scottish ruler from his wife's personal concerns.

"Lady McBlair is an independent career woman," he said, "and who she murders is entirely her own affair."

ON OTHER PAGES

- Those Birnam Wood Flats – who benefits? by Henry Porter 2
- Your Thanes Tonight 3
- Duff Cartoon by Mac 94

THE CONMAN WHO FOOLED CHERIE BLAIR

by Our Political Staff **Peter Foster**

A KNOWN conman with a long history of duping the public has become dangerously close to Cherie Blair, it has been revealed.

The confidence trickster, who goes by the name of Tony Blair (sometimes "the Prime Minister") befriended Cherie Blair and managed to convince her that he was a member of the Labour Party.

In fact, Tony was simply a hustler on the make, using Cherie's connections to further his career. He is not wanted in a number of countries apart from Britain and is the author of numerous failed scams including health, education and public transport.

"He is so believable," said one innocent victim. "He promises you the earth and then a few months later you realise you've been had."

Said another, Mr G. Brown, of Downing Street, "The man's a scoundrel. He told me that I could be Prime Minister. I feel a mug for being taken in so easily."

However, a spokesman for Cherie Blair issued a denial: "Mrs Blair has only met Tony once, at their wedding, and does not rely on him for any advice, financial or otherwise."

SOMEONE TELLS TRUTH SHOCK

by Our Media Staff

SOMEBODY IN public life told what appeared to be the truth.

He immediately apologised, telling reports, "I don't know what came over me. I just blurted it out without thinking."

Asked if he was going to resign on the grounds that he was unfit to hold office he said, "You're right. I have let everyone down, my colleagues, my family and myself." He added "My wife is not standing by me at this difficult time and I deserve everything that happens to me."

What do you think should happen to the man who told the truth?

Join the Eye's interactive poll and you decide how high he should be strung up!

Email:onlylanguagetheyunderstand@cab-driver.con

SPIN DOCTOR FOSTER

Guardian Meeja

How The Press Handled The Cherie Blair Affair

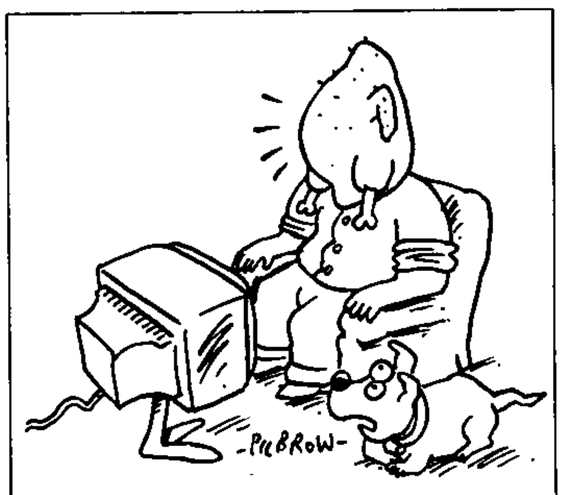
Roy Greenslime

OK, so the Guardian didn't get the Cherie Blair scoop. Ok, so we printed a denial from Number Ten without checking the story out. OK, so we ran a headline saying, "It's all rubbish dreamed up by right-wing loonies".

So what? The story is not that big a deal. It's not as though it's about Mark Thatcher's business deals or Jonathan Aitken telling lies or some Tory doing something important. And what's new about the Grauniad missing the odd scoop?

We sat on the Gordon Brown/Tony Blair row even though it happened in our own building!

Honestly. The BBC didn't make a fuss about Cherie Blair and neither did we. Good for us. And how typical of the fascists at the Daily Mail to suggest that, as a newspaper, the Blairs' Guardian should have been interested in some minor non-story instead of exercising our legitimate freedom of non-speech *(cont. for 94 pages)*



"I take it you'd like a hand in the kitchen"

ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev. A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

A STATEMENT FROM MRS CHERIE BOOTH QC

I must warn all parishioners that any suggestion that I have in any way had any dealings whatever with Mr Peter Frodster will incur legal proceedings pursued with extreme vigour under the Human Rights Act section 79 on "the protection of famous persons, including vicars' wives who are successful career women in their own right, from invasion of their privacy and of their inalienable right to purchase property on the cheap with or without the aid of convicted conmen."

C. Booth Q.C.
Matrix Chambers, The Vicarage

ANOTHER STATEMENT

Since reading the above statement it has been brought to my attention that I knew Mr Frodster extremely well and that he may indeed have helped me in negotiations over the purchase of two flats in the parish in Bristol Road on the Lord Kagan Estate. However, I was at all times unaware that Mr Frodster was a convicted fraudster and any suggestion to the contrary will be met with the full force of the lie.

C. Booth Q.C.

The editor would like to make it clear that these statements look a bit dodgy. A.C.

Advertisement

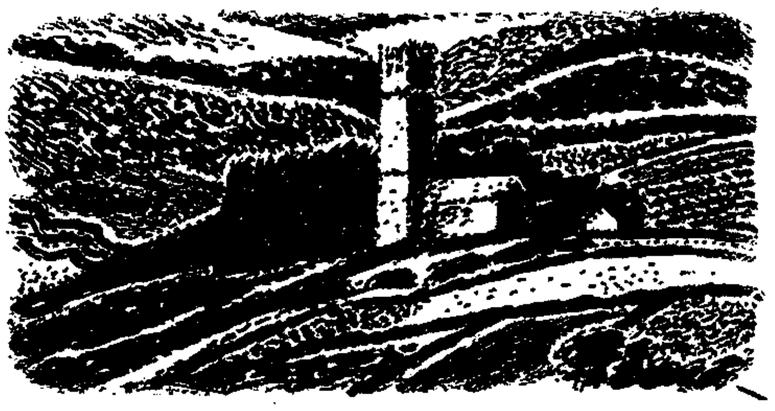
FLATS FOR RENT

One very agreeable flat close to the University of St Albion's (formerly Filler Polytechnic) has come onto the market.

Flat has famous undergraduate neighbour and would suit students with parents rich enough not to be bothered by top-up fees.

Apply Mrs Cherie Booth,
The Blind Trust House, The Vicarage.

EDITOR'S PICTURE CHOICE
Mr Campbell's favourite!



Hullo

And a particularly warm "hullo" to my dearest friend and neighbour, Gordon Brown!

As we approach the traditional season of goodwill, let me assure you that there is no shortage of it in the vicarage at the moment!

But to hear some people talk, you'd think that our parish treasurer and I were somehow at each other's throats!

So, let me explain to everyone in the parish just what lies behind all this malicious tittle-tattle.

A few weeks ago, my friend Gordon was invited to a breakfast prayer group organised by Mrs Rusbridger and her friend Mrs Toynbee.

Nothing wrong with that! Gordon enjoyed the decaffeinated herbal tea and Mrs Mombiot's delicious, homegrown organic croissants.

And he did get rather carried away with all the attention he was getting from all these good ladies!

So poor old Gordon perhaps said rather more than he should have done about how he didn't always see eye to eye with the vicar!

He even hinted that he himself could make a rather better job of running the parish than the present incumbent!

We all know that Gordon didn't mean any of this nonsense!

But the good ladies, alas, took it all seriously and began to pass a version of what Gordon was supposed to have said to their friends!

Before you could say Geoff Robinson, it was all over the parish and, of course, in the way these things do, it got rather wildly exaggerated along the way.

By the time this not very pleasant gossip got back to me, the story had become that Mr Brown and I were not even on speaking terms with each other, which is quite obviously ludicrous!

As I said to the Parish Partnership Counselling Group only last week at their annual End-of-Ramadan Cheese and Wine Evening, "All couples who go back a long way have their ups and downs! Of course, it's much better if we can say, in those immortal words of St Paul of McCartney, 'We can work it out'."

But if we can't, well, let's move on, because isn't that what Christmas is all about? Giving people things? And in your case, Gordon, what I'm thinking of giving you is the sack!

Peace to you all,
(except Saddam, of course!)

Tony

Women's Groups

The ladies of the parish enjoyed a highly successful evening, hosted by the vicar's wife, who introduced her friend Mrs Caplin, a very well-known expert on bio-holistic life therapies. Mrs Caplin entered a translucent plastic pyramid where she gave a very interesting talk.

After the lecture, she kindly allowed the audience to purchase scented candles, crystals, healing oils, relaxation tapes, yoga videos and "Baghavadgita" sensual vibrators, while she signed copies of her book 'Be Your Own You'.

Mrs Blackstone kindly provided the refreshments (some very welcome bowls of Tibetan lassi).

Announcements

■ Following complaints from many parents, Mr Straw's slide show on "Saddam The Terminator" has been postponed. After viewing the photographs showing dismembered corpses and the mutilation of Belgian nuns, it was agreed by the PCC that this was not perhaps entirely suitable material for what had been billed as "An Entertaining Evening For All The Family."

Parish Postbag

Dear Sir,

The Vicar is clearly in need of some decent advice particularly with regard to buying property! May I humbly offer my own services being something of an expert in this

Yours sincerely
Peter Mandelson, Hinduja Mansions, Robinson Road,

Dear Sir,

The Vicar's pathetic attempt to please both sides on the supreme moral issue of our time, ie hunting with dogs, is the most shameful act of appeasement since

Yours sincerely,
G. Kaufman, Baldilocks Cottage, TW3 NBG

The editor reserves the right to cut all letters for reasons of space. A.C.

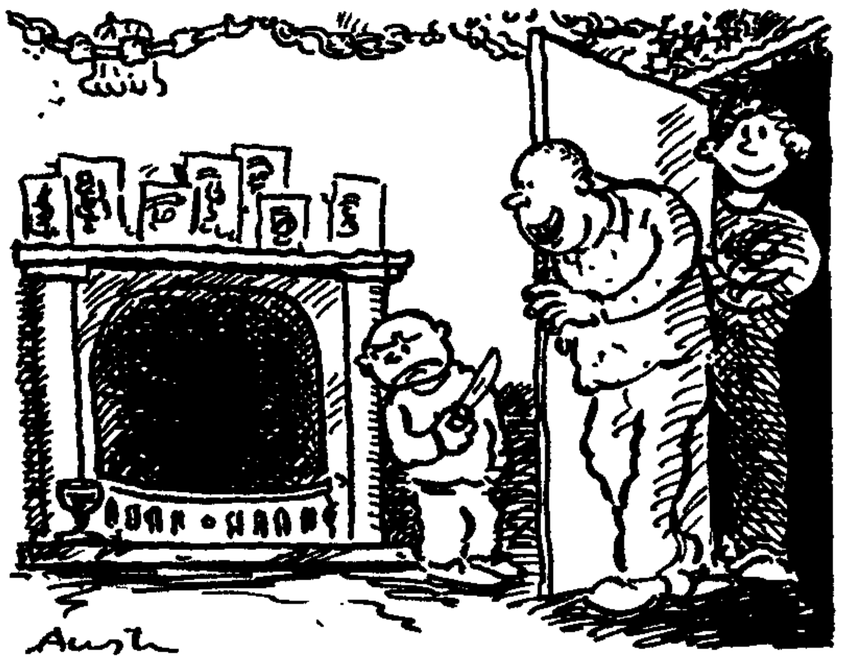
A Special Carol Service for this Sunday*

(*in honour of Carole Caplin)

Including all your favourite songs

- *We Wish You A Cherie Christmas*
- *I saw Mummy Kissing Her Career Goodbye*
- *The Lolly And The Spivy*
- *Three Blind Trusts*

(That's enough, Ed.)



"He still believes in Father Christmas"

WILLIAM STRAW SPEAKS OUT

News In Brief

IRAQ LATEST

THE UN weapons inspectors have hit back at criticism from the US government that they still haven't managed to find "an excuse to start a war".

"Obviously, the American government expected that we would quickly locate 'an excuse to start a war'", said the chief weapon's inspector Hans Blick, "but the fact that we are being given full and unfettered access to all sites supposedly containing weapons of mass destruction, only to discover nothing, makes our search all the harder."

However, a White House spokesman rejected these comments, saying the fact that, after four days of searching, the weapons inspectors hadn't found "any excuse to start a war" would not stop them from doing so.

Britain May Never Adopt 'The Brown'

NUMBER 10 has admitted privately that the chances of Britain scrapping the traditional 'The Blair' in favour of 'The Brown' are looking increasingly remote.

Before 'The Brown' could be adopted as our unit of leadership, five criteria, as laid down by the Prime Minister to the House in 1999, would first have to be met:

1) Hell freezing over 2) Pigs flying 3) The cows coming home 4) The twelfth of never 5) Over my dead body..

Recent polls have suggested that, despite people now being more familiar with 'The Brown', they still find it awkward and confusing and would prefer to stick with what they know.

Student Protests Against Authority Shock

IN A shocking development, a student was yesterday seen protesting against the authorities, and sheer unjustness of "the system".

A source close to the student said, "He was protesting because everything is *so* biased towards all those people within the establishment who have money and power – like his dad."

Inside

William Straw: It's Just Not Fair

TARZAN GETS COUGH

by Our Political Staff **India Knight-Nurse**

MR MICHAEL HESELTINE, the former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister, last night criticised the current Tory leader Mr Iain Duncan Cough, describing him as "showing no signs of getting better."

Mr Heseltine, known affectionately as Tarzan, told journalists from the medical press, "Unless we can get rid of this Cough, it could prove terminal."

The Tory leader, however, refused to comment.

Said a friend, "If he says anything, it will look as if he is worried. However, if he keeps quiet, everyone will think he's scared. He can't win... so what's new?"

HESELTINE FAVOURS GAY MARRIAGES

by Our Political Staff **Simon Hefferlump**

MICHAEL HESELTINE last night spoke out in favour of a "marriage made in heaven".

The marriage involves Mr Michael Portillo and his new friend, former Chancellor Mr Kenneth Clarke.

"They are a lovely couple," said Mr Heseltine, "who deserve to be recognised publicly as an authentic partnership."

Camp Followers

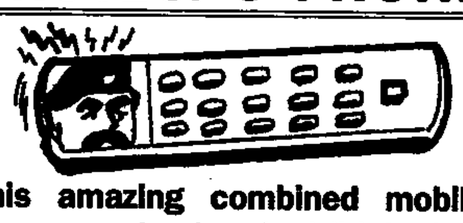
"If we are to seem a modern party, we must be seen to embrace couples like Mike and Ken."

HAPPY XMAS TO US ALL
WE FORGOT TO GET THE SMALLPOX VACCINE FOR GRANNY
GOD! THIS IS A TERR-IBLE PLACE
I SHOULD SAY HE'S BEEN DEAD ABOUT A WEEK
I'VE NEVER SEEN A SANTA CLAUS BEGGING BEFORE
GIMME SOME *@!!!NG MONEY!
AWAY IN A MANGER RAP THUD THUD
ASYLUM SEEKERS
POLICE
PO
BRATS
'E DOESNT BELIEVE IN SANTA, BUT 'E DOES BELIEVE IN T.V. ADS
KILL!
I WANT! I WANT! I WANT!
I DON' WANT NONE OF 'EM
HARRODS
DING! DING!
FED UP WIV SHOPPIN'
XMAS HEROIN
HO! HO! HO!
HEATH

Gnome's Xmas

Don't let Saddam catch you napping with

PROTECT-O-PHONE



This amazing combined mobile phone and chemical/biological warfare detector will tell you instantly if you are being threatened. Its micro-sensor has a thousand-mile radius and will immediately text you to warn you of impending death.

Detects ● *nerve gas* ● *anthrax* ● *smallpox* ● *nuclear radiation*

£7,788 *(batteries extra)*

Plays theme tune from BBC's ***Rolf On Art***

New from Japan!

THE INCREDIBLE

BOND-SAI TREE

Yes, it's true!

This tiny tree stands just 007cm high! Yet in every other respect it is an ordinary Bonsai tree! Be the envy of your friends with this movie-themed miniature woodland wonder!

39p (for box of 60)

As **Ernst Stavro Blofeld** might have said: *"Good morning, Mr Bond-sai Tree. I've been expecting you."*

Smokers! *Say goodbye to standing outside in the cold to enjoy a cigarette with*

FLEXiFAG

– the new telescopic cigarette holder from Chicago.

★ **FLEXIFAG** allows you to sit at your desk and smoke outside! Extends to over 100m and can turn corners, navigate stairs and go out of windows.

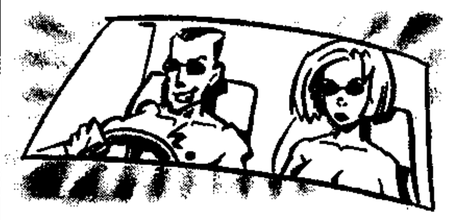
It's a must-have for the modern smoker.

£68.68

♩♩ Plays theme tune from TV's *The Office*

MOTORISTS!

CAR-SOL



New from the Falklands, the complete in-car solarium! Fed up with grey skies and winter weather? Switch on the Car-Sol and – hey presto! – ultra-violet rays will give you a Bermuda-style tan which will be the envy of fellow motorists. Will fit any make of car*. Plays Cliff Richard's *Summer Holiday (We're All Going On A).*

**Except Ford, Vauxhall, Toyota, BMW etc*

£3,224

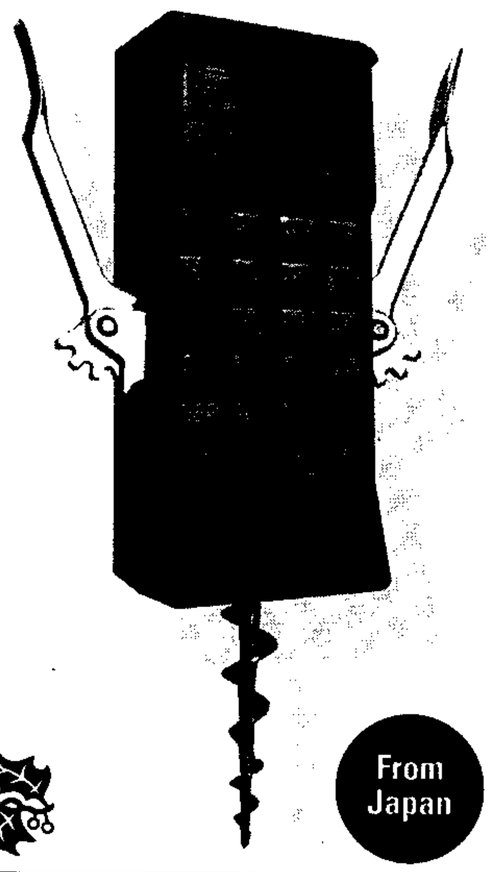
THE DIGI-SCREW

■ The world's first fully digital corkscrew offers cutting-edge technology to prevent the all-too-common hazards of cork removal. Simply program type of wine, grape variety, vintage, texture of cork, room temperature, alcohol content and mouth aperture size into the control panel and let DigiScrew do the rest. Hey presto! – in two hours cork comes out! No frills, no spills!

COLOURS: Goddess Green, Monday Black, Rabbi Blue

£1,274 ***(batteries extra)***

★ As used by James Bond in *Die Another Day*



From Japan

WPB LOVERS!!

Say goodbye to bin-emptying chores with the

BIN-BURN 2002

– the latest breakthrough in Tunisian office resource management technology.

Looks just like an ordinary office waste-paper basket. But the in-built laser-power incineration unit can "eliminate" up to one million tonnes a day of unwanted paper, sweet wrappers, plastic sandwich holders, condoms etc.

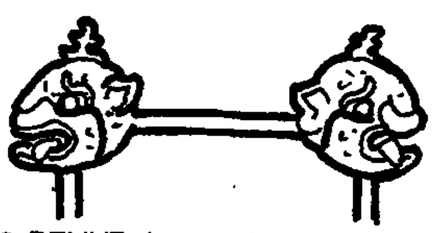
As approved by the HSE and the EC for the safe disposal of nuclear waste

£412,762 ***(+ VAT)***

WARNING: Should not be used within 20 kilometres of built-up areas

Gnomes Past

THE *AZTEC* BOOT SCRAPER



● RELIVE the mysteries of the Aztec age when you scrape your boots on this authentic artefact dedicated to Muud, the Aztec God of Boots. Made out of original obsidian, mined in the Boguz Mountains of New Mexico, not only is this boot scraper superbly practical but it is a work of art for your loved ones to cherish in years to come.

£237.99

ZIPALERT™

YOU'RE just coming out of the little boys' room and everyone's pointing and laughing! Oh no! You forgot to do up your zip again!!

Not now. No, Sir. Thanks to the new microchip zip sensor developed by Nicaraguan scientists, the **Zipalert** will emit the following verbal warning: "Your flies are undone. Your flies are undone," until zip is fastened. *No more embarrassment ever.*

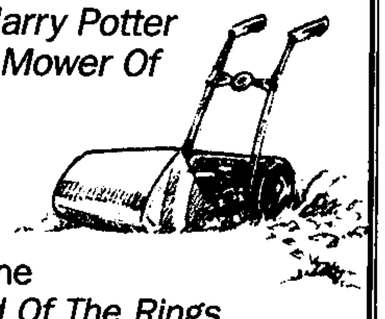
Says influential think-tank supremo, Lord Birt: ***"This is blue fly thinking at its best!"***

£68.99

RELIVE the magic of Harry Potter with your own lawn-mower.

Fun to own! Fun to use! Kids will love it. As seen in the forth-coming movie, *Harry Potter And The Mower Of Lawns.*

The Harry Potter Lawn-mower



£52.78

● Plays theme tune from *Lord Of The Rings*

NEW FROM BRAZIL

GM Self-Peeling Potatoes

■Say goodbye to spud-peeling misery with this latest miracle of Genetically Modified technology. The common potato, thanks to the introduction of snake genes, now sheds its skin automatically once a year!

AT LAST – DIRECT FROM OSLO

EDIBLE CUFFLINKS

Stave off the pangs of hunger when there's no sign of any food! Ideal for wedding receptions, corporate dinners, expensive restaurants and funeral receptions! They look just like the real thing, but these cufflinks are nutrition-rich, vitamin-packed miniature food capsules that will going for hours!

FLAVOURS: Pi fish-fingers.

£4.99 for set of six pairs

Mail Mart

THE NIGELLA LAWSON HORROR MASK

Frighten your friends this Christmas when you put on this larger-than-life latex disguise and watch your loved ones run a mile when they think TV's Domestic Goddess has come to cook Christmas dinner!

● *Hours of fun for all the family!*

2p per dozen

THE STONE OF SCHAMA

FOR CENTURIES the mysterious Stone of Schama has worked its magic on all those who are lucky enough to possess it. It looks like an ordinary pebble that you might find on the beach, but inside it contains all the wisdom of the universe and brings you good fortune for ever and ever. **£49.99**

"I was just an obscure lecturer in America. Now I'm an international TV star!" – ***Professor Simon S.***

Piles sufferers!

PSEUDODENT

Say goodbye to haemorrhoid embarrassment with the new PSEUDODENT. Looks just like a tube of toothpaste but inside is your favourite haemorrhoid cream. No fuss, no blush, ever again!!

SIZES: Small, Large, Ouch.

Price: £1.79, £2.79, £78.30

♪ *Plays theme tune from TV's* ***Fame Academy***

THE WHISTLING WORM OF WARSAW

FOR CENTURIES the citizens of Warsaw have kept their spirits alive with the help of one of the world's most astonishing natural phenomena – a worm that whistles!

Only two inches long, this earth-burrowing wonder of nature has committed to its tiny memory a whole repertoire of your favourite melodies, including: ● Beethoven's *Ode To Joy* ● Puccini's *Nessun Dorma* ● Janacek's *Glagolithic Mass* ● Roger Whittaker's *Durham Town*

£1,289.00

Allow 28 days for delivery.

WARNING: Worms need time to acclimatize to conditions outside Warsaw before beginning to whistle.

Hat wearers!

HAT-STICK™

NO MORE there-goes-my-hat trauma on windy days, thanks to the remarkable **Hatstick**! Ukrainian scientists have come up with a winner! Just run **Hatstick** round the inside band of your favourite headwear and – *abracadabra!* – your hat will never come off again!

£78.99 per stick. *Ideal for* ● *Philby* ● *Warburg* ● *Panatella*

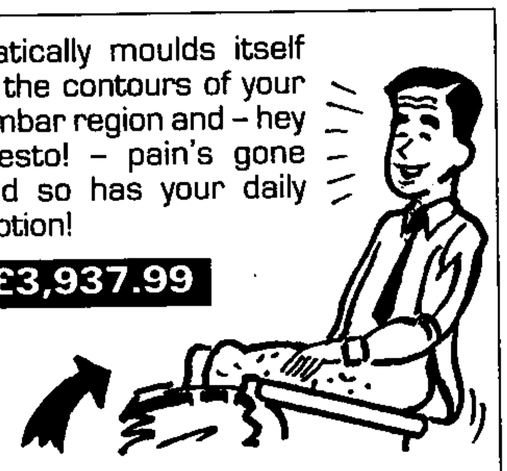
Says top Hatstick user and TV's Mr Autopsy ***Dr Hääagen von Dazs:*** *"You've never seen ME with my hat off."*

Back sufferers!

THE ORTHOPAEDIC RECLINING TOILET SYSTEM X-747B™

Developed by the Iraqi space programme, the X-747B marks the end of bowel-function-related back pain for good. This latest breakthrough in orthopaedic reclining toilet systems automatically moulds itself to the contours of your lumbar region and – hey presto! – pain's gone and so has your daily motion!

£3,937.99



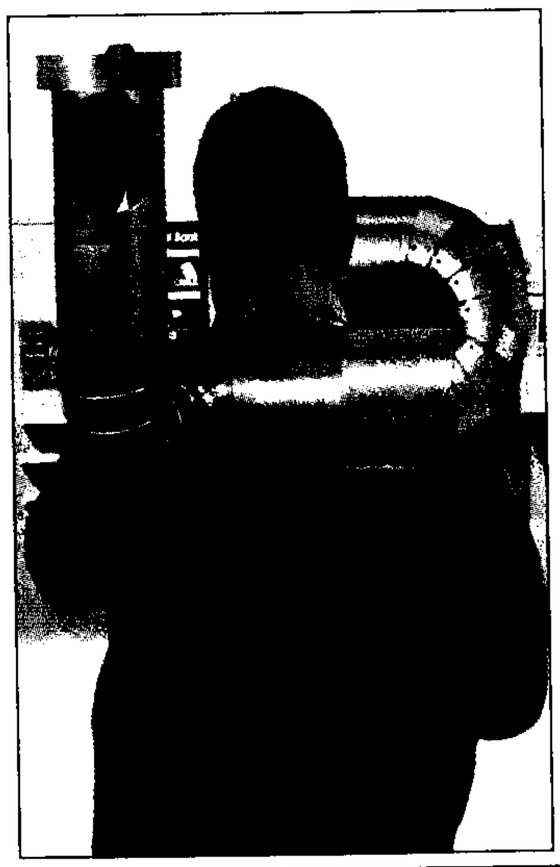
✶ As seen in James Bond's *Die Another Day*

Gnomes Past

***Genuine* VICTORIAN TRAINERS**

NOW you can *literally* retrace the steps of our illustrious Victorian forebears! You can *step* into the shoes of men like Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Charles Dickens and Jack the Ripper! Made from authentic leather-style poly-gnomelene, these authentic Victorian trainers look stylish even today.

★ *COLOURS: Black Hole of Calcutta, Thin Red Line, White Feathers.* **£372.99 per pair**



Latest from Toronto!

SECUROPIN™

THE ULTIMATE in cashpoint user security! No need to worry that someone is behind you when you tap in your PIN and withdraw cash.

This handy periscope straps easily onto your shoulder and gives all-round vision, so any potential thief can be easily spotted.

£398.99

(Plays theme tune from TV's *Crimewatch*)

DOG-LOVERS FIDOCCINO

WHY should your dog miss out on the coffee craze that's sweeping the country? Now, with one sachet of Fidoccino and a bowl of hot water, your four-legged friend will get a shot of delicious frothy caffeine to keep him going through the whole day.

PRICE: 10p per dozen sachets

FLAVOURS: Skinny Beef To Go, Double Chicken With Wings, Espresso Bonio

Dog Lovers! Say goodnight to Poop-Scoop vision misery with the new

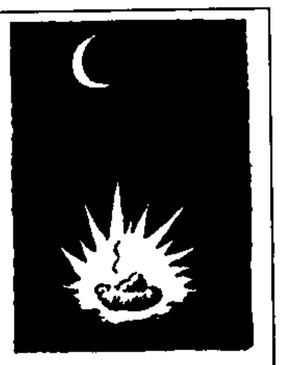
LUMOPOOP

This incredible luminous dog-waste retriever from Iceland will enable you to see Fido's little present to the pavement – even on the darkest night.

Plays theme tune from David Attenborough's ***Life Of Mammals.***

COLOURS: Gordon Brown.

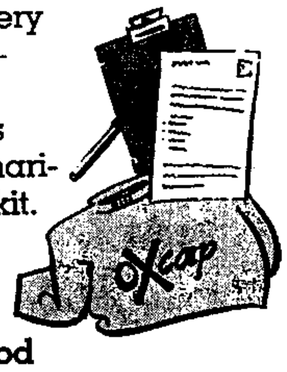
£12.99 (batteries extra)



● *Save £££££s in fines with this miracle of Canine Excremental technology!* ●

CHARI-GONE

Say goodbye to hi-there-have-you-got-a-minute misery! Every day millions of people are accosted by cheery charity workers – but how do you escape? Now it's easy with the Chari-Gone complete kit.



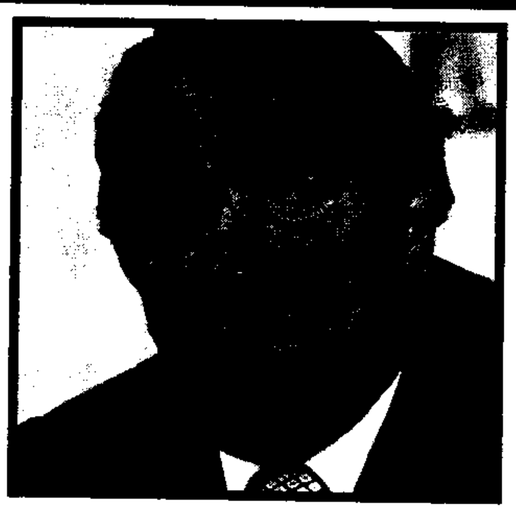
Consists of:

● **clipboard** ● **authentic-style form** ● **good cause biro** ● **sweatshirt with convincing logo** *(choose from Oxcap, Aidsfam, Menscope).*

Charity workers will think you are one of them and will let you continue your journey in peace!

£524.75 *(plus gift tax)*

THEN AND NOW



1. Mirror bully accused of financial impropriety, investigated by DTI, uses newspaper to try and discredit Private Eye.

2. Ends up falling off yacht.

1. Mirror bully accused of financial impropriety, investigated by DTI, uses newspaper to try and discredit Private Eye.

2. Er...

"I love Christmas, Bob hates it, so we've reached a compromise..."

WHY WE MUST GET RID OF HUSSAIN NOW

by Our World Affairs Editor **Christopher Simon Jenkins**

THERE is no time to lose if we are to avoid being totally massacred.

That is the chilling truth that this country must face as we discover that we have no weapons at all with which to take on the enemy. There is only one solution. A regime change, involving the immediate removal of the hated Nasser Hussain who *(cont. p. 94)*

Late Score From Baghdad

England 2 for 7 (Vaughan 2, *run out*)

Presidents XI 2,757 megatons for 1 (Hussein S., 2,757, *not out)*

Season's Greetings From Sir Michael Peat

Lines Written On The 40th Anniversary Of The BBC's 'That Was The Week That Was'

by William McGonagall

'Twas in the year nineteen-hundred-and-sixty-two
That the world of broadcasting achieved a mighty breakthrough
Thanks to the daring of Auntie BBC
A phenomenon was born, known to all as "TW3".

"That Was The Week That Was" was its full name
And on its young stars it conferred instant fame.
Lance Percival, Kenneth Cope and Roy Kinnear,
There was no sacred cow at which these fearless young satirists would not sneer.

On Saturday nights the whole nation stayed in to view,
Waiting for Millicent Martin to come in on cue.
"That was the week that was, it's over let it go," she sang,
Accompanied by Willie Rushton and the rest of the irreverent gang.

But the greatest star of all to emerge from the show
Was the youthful David Frost, believe it or no.
"Hullo, good evening and welcome" was his catchphrase,
Repeated by millions within a matter of days.

Who would have thought back in nineteen-sixty-two
That this fearless iconoclast would one day become the king of the obsequious interview?
With a knighthood to his name and married to the daughter of a Duke,
It would once have been enough to make his loyal fans puke.

The young Bernard Levin was another abrasive star,
He could always be relied on to go that little bit too far.
At baiting Tory ladies he was certainly the ace
Until one member of the audience came up to punch him in the face.

But the genius behind the scenes was the show's producer, Ned Sherrin,
Who became as well-known in his day as Reginald Perrin.
His close companion and collaborator was Miss Caryl Brahms,
Though it is unlikely that they spent much time in each other's arms.

Between them this brilliant and outrageous crew
Brought down Harold Macmillan and the Earl of Home too.
TW3 changed the face of Britain completely and forever
With its biting barbs so witty and so clever.

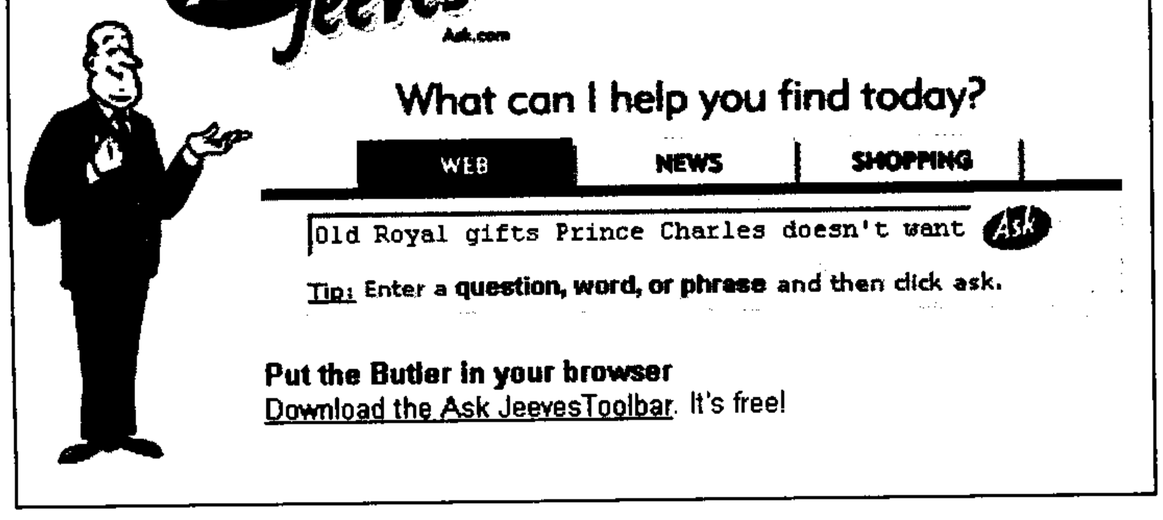
TV comedy had at last entered the modern age
And from Monty Python to Spitting Image it would be all the rage.
This mould-breaking programme achieved more than anyone thought it could
Which was all the more remarkable since it was never really much good.

© William McGonagall 2002

That Sir Alex Ferguson Citation in Full

SALUTAMUS ALEXIUS FERGUSONENSIS ALIAS 'FERGIUS' MANAGERIUS FAMOSISSIMUS MANCUNIENSIS UNITUS NATUS IN CALEDONIA IN ANNO MCMXLI SED VENIT AD MANCUNIAM ET FACTUS ARTIFEX MAXIMUS SQUADDUM PEDEBALLO DIVESISSIMUS IN MUNDO QUI VINCIT OMNES COMPETITIONES INCLUDUS PRIMERIUM LEGUM CHAMPIONORUMQUE ET FA FINALE AD STADIUM WEMBLEYENSIS NUNC FERMATUS PRO DEMOLITIONIE ET REDEVELOPMENTATIO ATQUE PROPRIETORIUS EQUUS CELERRIMUS PETRUM GIBRALTAR-IENSIS ET PUBLICAVIT LIBRUM AUTOBIOGRAPHICUM BESTSELLERENSIS SCRIPTUM AB HUGHUS MCILVANIUS HACKUS ET PISSARTICUS MAXIMUS SED SUPRA OMNES NOTABILIS QUAM PATRONUS DAVIDII BECKHAMII UXOR POSHI EX-CANTORA PUELLAE SPICORUM ET PATER BROOKLYNIS ROMEOQUE ID EST SATIS. ED.

© Universitatis Sancti Andreius (quondam North Sea Polytechnic)


Ask Jeeves
Ask.com
What can I help you find today?
WEB
NEWS
SHOPPING
Old Royal gifts Prince Charles doesn't want
Ask
Tip: Enter a question, word, or phrase and then click ask.
Put the Butler in your browser
Download the Ask JeevesToolbar. It's free!

"Are we nearly there yet, Dad?"

BECKHAM INTERNET RUMOUR

by Our Showbiz Staff **Phil Cyberspace**

A NUMBER of newspapers were yesterday forced to issue a formal denial of "an unsubstantiated rumour" which has been circulating on the internet.

The rumour, which they were at pains to point out has no basis in fact, is that British newspapers are so desperate for copy that they run any old rubbish about Beckham they see on their computer screens, even if it is self-evidently untrue and made up by a virtual loony in an anorak.

Said one editor, "This is an appalling allegation and I certainly do not believe it. Why on earth would a newspaper go to the internet for made-up stories when it is paying its showbiz columnists to do the same thing?"

The Rumour No Paper Dared To Print

"David Beckham is happily married and likes his children."

the PREMIERSH*TS

PAUL WOOD

BLOODY FOOTBALL MASCOTS IN THEIR FUNNY LITTLE SUITS TAKING THE PISS OUT OF US AWAY TEAMS...
WEARING THE RED OF MAN. UTD YOU THINK YOU'RE SO SPECIAL...
WHACK!
TOSSER!
DEPARTMENT STORE GROTTO
COME ON LEAVE IT OUT, WE'VE GOT TO BE AT THE STADIUM IN HALF AN HOUR!

ME AND MY SPOON

THIS WEEK

PAUL BURRELL

Have spoons played a large part in your life?

Am I getting paid for this?

No, but if you have anything to plug, we can mention it at the end.

Ok. Yes, spoons have been very important. As a Royal butler, one of my chief duties was to ensure that the spoons were always laid in the correct order at all times. For example, Prince Charles was always very particular about how I placed his soup spoon. It had to be no less than six centimetres from the edge of the table and three centimetres from the butter knife.

Was Princess Diana fussy about spoons?

Oh no. She was very relaxed about the whole spoon business. She'd use any old spoon. The Queen once told me that she'd seen Diana eating a strawberry yoghurt with an egg spoon. "Paul," she said, "it really made me laugh. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen in my life. Don't you agree Paul?"

Did Princess Diana ever give you any spoons?

Hundreds. There was a set of spoons with the crest of the Isle of Wight on them which she was given when she opened a new primary school in Ventnor. "You take these, Paul," she said, "I'd like you to have them. And if anyone ever accuses you of stealing them, you tell them I gave them to you."

So, you didn't nick them then?

No, they were all gifts, every single thing. You know what she said to me on more than one occasion – "Thank goodness I can rely on you, Paul, you are my spoon."

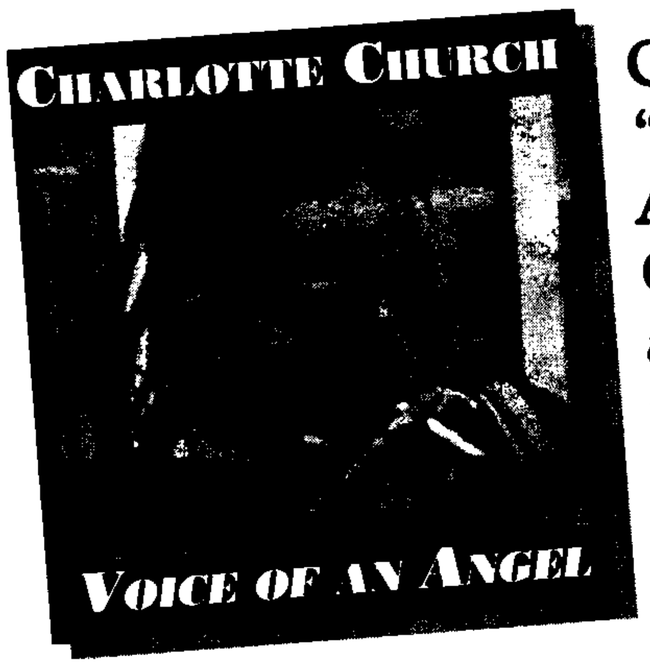
Has anything amusing ever happened to you in connection with a spoon?

Yes, we were all on Britannia once (this section of the interview has been removed for legal reasons).

NEXT WEEK: Simon Heffer – *"Me and My Heifer."*

Advertisement

New from Gnometel



Charlotte "Voice of an Angel" Church sings all your traditional Christmas favourites

INCLUDING:

● *Ding Dong Merrily on the Aeroplane* ●

● *Oh Come All Ye Faithful (But not to Meet and Greet)* ●

● *The Hello! and the I've-Got-Boyfriend* ●

● *F*** You Merry Gentlemen* ●

● *Silent Night (Concert Cancelled)* ●

HURRY, HURRY – WHILST SHOCKS LAST!

The Most Incredible Book The Daily Mail Has Ever Serialised

BIBLE CODE III

The book that prophesied

● the moon landing ● the fall of the Berlin Wall ● the introduction of the euro ● John Major's affair with Edwina Currie ● the acquittal of Royal butler Paul Burrell

FORMER NASA scientist Erich von Loonibin has spent the past 10 years combing every word of the Bible to decrypt the secret code in which the entire history of the world is foretold in breath-taking detail.

Using a complex linguistic formula, based on the dimensions of the Pyramid, and the sounds used by whales to communicate across thousands of miles of ocean, von Loonibin has now come up with his most astonishing prediction of all.

He shows how a key passage in the Book of Revelation spells out the hidden message that one of Britain's leading newspapers will be reduced to filling its pages with complete garbage and drivel.

5 [i] For her sins have reached unto heaven, and [k] God hath remembered her iniquities.

6 [l] Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: [m] in the cup which she hath filled [n] fill to her double.

7 [o] How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a [p] queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow.

8 Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and [q] she shall be utterly burned with fire: [r] for strong *is* the Lord God who judgeth her.

11 And [a] the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise any more:

12 [b] The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scar-

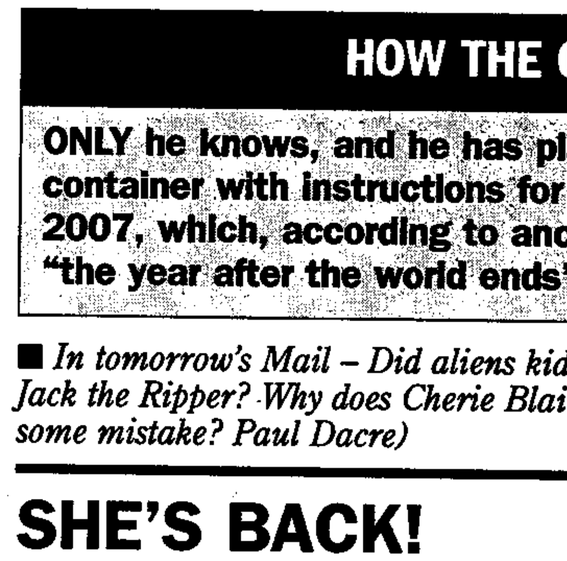
HOW THE CODE WORKS

ONLY he knows, and he has placed it in a sealed lead container with instructions for it to be opened in the year 2007, which, according to ancient Sumerian runes, will be "the year after the world ends".

■ *In tomorrow's Mail – Did aliens kidnap Robert Maxwell? Is Prince Philip Jack the Ripper? Why does Cherie Blair believe in New Age nonsense? (Surely some mistake? Paul Dacre)*

SHE'S BACK! THE WORLD'S WORST COLUMNIST

TINA BROWN



THE BUZZ around the happening zone of the Upper East side is that Bloomburg's blitz bar is the new Torpedo Room, the place where you can see the likes of Rocco Schlumberger (voted top of *Forbes* Magazine's "Hottest Celebrity Orthodontists" poll) and Martha Moldstein, the ice-and-furs queen, who divorced her once-Wall Street-player husband Herman the day the Dow dived off the 68th floor and turned to jelly on the sidewalk, only for her ex to take up with Sadie Slitz, the fast-rising nymphette star of Magimix's must-see remake of *The Great Gatsby*, some of which incidentally was shot at the Long Island mansion of billionaire car rental king Luigi Clampini, whose third wife, model Vestri, features on the front cover of this month's *Glossy* Magazine, photographed by Mario Testosterone, whose stepfather, Otto Bumdorf Jr was *(cont'd. p. 94)*

DIARY

H.M. THE QUEEN

I have been working on my Christmas message.

It is not going well.

"Traditionally, Christmas is the season when many of us, young and old alike, take stock of the year that has passed and ask ourselves why we bother..."

"Christmas is a time when our thoughts inevitably turn to family. We ask ourselves, over and over again, why just one or two of them can't for the life of them sometimes do something right for a change..."

"In this, my Jubilee year, as I have travelled up and down the length and breadth of the country I have had occasion to meet a great many of you. Time and time again I have been struck by the very real way in which you just stare at me as though I were some sort of performing seal..."

I can't seem to hit the right note. Perhaps I will have a little lie-down.

A knock on the door. It is my son, Edward.

"Hello Edward," I say, informally.

"Hello Mummy," he replies.

We shake hands. What's that expression everyone uses these days? That's it. We are a close-knit family.

"Have you come far?" I ask.

"Not really," he says, "We don't live all that far away. Though the traffic was quite busy."

"There are a lot of cars on the roads these days" I say. "You sometimes wonder where they are all going!"

"Yes!" he agrees.

We have a smile.

"You can't help but wonder," he says, "where they are all going!"

"Yes!" I agree.

It has been an odd sort of year.

In August, there was an intruder on the Palace roof, making a terrible racket with an electric guitar.

I asked who it was.

It turned out to be an old woman called May.

Needless to say, once one had got in, there was no stopping them.

By the end of the day the garden was absolutely jam-packed and no one could do anything about it. One simply had to grin and bear it.

But I didn't really bother to grin.

I saw a lot of the Prime Minister during the past year. We have regular meetings. He greatly values my tremendous wealth of wisdom and experience.

It is my duty as Monarch to advise and inform. "My son Edward pointed out that there was an awful lot of traffic on the roads this morning," I tell him.

"That will be the cars," he says.

"And lorries," I say. Lorries are for putting things in.

"Yes. Cars and lorries," he agrees. Once again, he has been able to draw on my vast wealth of experience.

"People getting from A to B," he adds.

That doesn't sound very far, I point out.

"They might be better off walking," I say, giving it some thought. "Perhaps the third lane of the motorway could be reserved for pedestrians, with cars and lorries in the first."

The Prime Minister says that is one idea he has never thought of.

He will look into it.

I am pleased my idea seems to have 'caught on'.

"...which would leave the second lane free for horses and carriages and so forth," I add.

I ask after his wife: "How is Norma?"

They do appreciate it when one shows a bit of personal interest. He says his wife is very well.

"Well, goodbye," I say, getting out of my chair, shaking his hand and leaving the room. This is his signal to depart.

"Happy Christmas, Charles," I say, shaking his hand and presenting him with a neatly-wrapped blue tie.

"Super," he says.

"I trust it fits," I say.

"Happy Christmas, Andrew," I say, shaking his hand and presenting him with a neatly-wrapped yellow tie.

"Super," he says.

"I trust it fits," I say.

The other two get ties too. "You can always use yours to muzzle that dog of yours," I say to Anne.

"Fair enough!" she laughs.

We go into lunch.

"I'm not eating off this," says Philip. "It's bloody plastic."

I look down. He is right. Our plates are made of plastic, and so are the knives and forks.

I pull up the cloth. Beneath it is a trestle table.

At this point, Charles mentions that Edward and Andrew are both sitting on chairs brought in from the garden.

I call the butler over. "What happened to our silver and our dining table and our chairs?" I ask.

"Out of harm's way," he says, with a wink.

Like many grandmothers, I'm afraid I spoil my grandchildren at Christmas.

A shiny ten pence piece with their Christmas cards.

And Christmas "crackers" – one each – after lunch.

I keep their paper hats safe in a box, so they can be clean-on next year.

After lunch, we all feel rather merry. I turn to my daughter Anne.

"Anne" I say, "Do tell us that story of the time your dog savaged those people in the park!"

"Oh, go on, tell us, Aunt Anne!" chorus my grandchildren.

It is one of her favourite stories. She always tells it so well.

By the end, we are all in fits.

I call the butler over. "I think we might have our coffee sitting on the armchairs in the drawing room" I say.

"What armchairs?" the butler replies.

As told to
CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER

COME UNDER THE MISTLETOE, DEBS.
NOW CLOSE YOUR EYES AND PUCKER YOUR LIPS, GORGEOUS.
HAPPY CHRISTMAS, BEAUTIFUL...
OW!
THERE YOU GO. THE FINEST COLLAGEN MONEY CAN BUY.

Literary Review

Altar ego

The Office of Innocence
Thomas Keneally
(Sceptre, £17.99)

WHAT's wrong with Australian fiction? There must be Australians writing confident modern novels but they're not getting promoted over here. Instead, the books that get noticed and win the prizes are all stuck in The Past.

Peter Carey, for example, has written some excellent contemporary novels. Yet his two Booker winners, *Oscar and Lucinda* and that laborious spoof memoir of Ned Kelly, are both firmly rooted in the 19th century; and it was a Dickensian pastiche, *Jack Maggs*, which hooked him a Commonwealth prize.

Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, which won last year's Whitbread and was also shortlisted for the Booker, is set in 1857. This year's Commonwealth went to Richard Flanagan for *Gould's Book of Fish*, which is set in the 1820s. Even Patrick White, Australia's only Nobel prizewinner for literature, is chiefly remembered for such historical novels as *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves* and *The Tree of Man*.

And then there is the unfeasibly prolific Thomas Keneally, who is best known here for *Schindler's Ark*, set in World War Two. It won him the Booker, for which he has been shortlisted on three other occasions. No doubt the Spielberg treatment helped his subsequent career, as in a lesser way did *Our Country's Good*, Timberlake Wertenbaker's award-winning dramatisation of Keneally's *The Playmaker*, set in the 18th century. Many if not most of his other novels also have a historical setting; and so, suprise surprise, does *The Office of Innocence*.

This latest concerns a naïve young priest, Fr Frank Darragh, the curate of a suburban parish in Sydney during World War Two. He spends his Saturday afternoons listening to the routine confessions of pious housewives and self-abusive adolescents and unquestioningly accepts the absolute authority of the church as represented by Monsignor Carolan, his parish priest. It is a life of "blessed banality", despite the wartime restrictions and the looming threat of a Japanese invasion.

But then a brief encounter with the attractive wife of a soldier serving overseas lures Fr Frank into a quicksand world of relative morality and theological doubt. The sins now sealed to secrecy by his confessional vows range through black marketeering, adultery and child abuse, to serial murder.

Caught in the crossfire, both moral and military, Fr Frank discovers first a weakness in himself and then a strength which, um, er, well it's a sort of holy rites of passage thing. The woman gets murdered, he's in the frame, but the real murderer actually confesses to him. What can he do? At the end of a switchback plot of increasingly lurid improbability, Fr Frank turns out to have failed as a priest but succeeded as a human being.

Fr Thomas Keneally, as we might have known him (though we probably wouldn't), also apparently failed as a priest, but succeeded as a writer instead. Could this "altar saga" be his fond tribute to the Church Militant of which he was so nearly a pillar? Er, is the Pope a Protestant?

If Fr Frank makes an ass of himself, it is only, one is led to believe, from the highest motives. And in the end he becomes a sort of action hero. The Catholic Church on the other hand, comes off pretty badly. The monsignor is worldly and avaricious. The bishop is more concerned about scandal in the diocese than saving fallen souls. Their reaction to Durragh's adventures is to pack him off to a monastery on retreat and, when that doesn't shut him up, to defrock him altogether. It's not exactly an episode of *Father Ted*.

Of course it's fashionable to attack the Catholic Church these days; and why not, it hardly dares defend itself. Naughty priests are subjected to the full rigour of tabloid condemnation, and senior clergy held vicariously liable for the slightest misdemeanour. Next to this, a somewhat creaky old fashioned semi-thriller set in a sepia tinted version of WWII is hardly going to rock the cloister.

The story could as well, perhaps more courageously, certainly more interestingly, have been set in the present day, when the relationship between the church and its wayward clergy is every bit as fraught, if not far more so (though the congregation somewhat feebler). But that would have required a different kind of research, far less agreeable, and without those nostalgic uniforms who would buy the film or mini-saga rights?

So what in the end does this book tell us about either Australia now or the Catholic church? About the latter, not much. Questions of priestly conscience have been better dealt with elsewhere, and not just by Graham Greene.

As for Australia, it seems to be symptomatic of a current malaise in antipodean literature, or at the very least of what the British publishing industry (particularly its prize-giving arm) thinks it ought to consist of. This malaise would appear to consist of a lack of confidence in the present as a subject fit for literary treatment (as opposed to afternoon soaps), and a navel-gazing obsession with the past.

Forthcoming Books

Doubting Thomas

■ IN HIS MOST recent communication with Lord Gnome (*Eye* 1065), the legendary "investigative journalist" and "best-selling novelist" Gordon Thomas was eager to boast of his close connections with senior officers in the CIA, MI5, MI6 and Mossad "who over the years have provided me with 'background' to ensure my information was correct".

If he wants anyone to believe him, he may have to remove the "Feedback Forum" section from his investigative website globe-intel.net, which features a number of impertinent postings from readers casting doubt on his supposedly well-sourced scoops about Saddam's small penis, Princess Diana's murder, etc, etc. One recent comment runs thus: *"Last Day in the Life of Diana*. This article states that GCHQ is in Chelmsford. It is common knowledge that it is in Cheltenham. I'm surprised that a person as knowledgeable as Gordon Thomas would make such an elementary error."

Another recent story by Thomas revealed that at Senate hearings in 1987 Lt Col Oliver North had identified Osama Bin Laden as the most dangerous man in the world, only to have his warnings pooh-poohed by one Senator Al Gore. As several readers of Thomas's website have helpfully pointed out, the man named by North was actually Abu Nidal, and Gore wasn't even a member of the Senate committee in question. The tale is a well-known internet hoax that has been doing the rounds for at least a year. But, as one contributor to his Feedback Forum observes: "That is Gordon Thomas for you."

Now it seems that even the publishers of Thomas's forthcoming book on Robert Maxwell's death are beginning to have their doubts. The gist of the book – co-written with Irish hack Martin Dillon – is that on the fateful night Cap'n Bob was waiting on the deck of his boat for a team of Israeli frogmen from Mossad who had promised to bring him £400m in cash; but when the intelligence agents boarded the yacht they injected him with a lethal nerve agent instead and chucked him overboard.

A proof-copy of the book reached a former deputy head of Mossad, who contacted the New York publishers Carroll-Graf to point out that Thomas's main source – the notorious Ari Ben-Menashe (*Eyes* passim) – may not be, er, entirely reliable. Publication has now been delayed until 16 December, and the publishers are apparently refusing to publicise the book. "The US publisher won't even confirm what his print run is," Gordon Thomas complained to *The Times* last week, "or whether he is taking even a small advertisement. In 50 years of being a published author I have never encountered such a situation."

Never mind: he has plenty of other exciting projects to console him. Several papers have reported that Cate Blanchett is being "lined up" to star in a film written by Gordon Thomas about Yvonne Ridley, the *Sunday Express* hackette who was briefly detained by the Taliban last year. Only the most incurable cynic would wonder whether Blanchett herself knows anything about this thrilling project.

We also look forward to the most sensational story of all. Back in May, Thomas published an exclusive headed "Gaddafi's Clone Due in Autumn", which claimed that Mossad (inevitably) "has discovered that the world's first baby clone – a boy due to born in November – will be the biological replica of Colonel Gaddafi". If Gaddafi's mini-me was indeed born in November, we must be due for a further bulletin any day – assuming that Thomas's top-level Mossad sources are up to speed, of course. Can a best-selling book and a Hollywood movie deal be far behind?

SNIPCOCK & TWEED
THIS IS WHAT PUBLISHING'S ALL ABOUT!
SNIPCOCK & TWEED CHRISTMAS PARTY
WE FORGOT TO PROMOTE IT
MINCE PIES 3 FOR 2
CASH BAR
50% GOES TO WH SMITH
XMAS PUDDING CONTAINS 20p NOW 5p

BOOKS & BOOKMEN

■ THE *Daily Mail* was hardly exaggerating when it described its three day "Royal X-Files" serialisation as being drawn from "a startling new book."

For in *The War of the Windsors*, "three best selling writers set out to reveal what they claim is the untold story of the House of Windsor, and the unconstitutional behaviour of those who safeguard its secrets".

Given that the authors, Lynn Picknett, Clive Prince and Stephen Prior have past tomes to their credit with titles such as *The Stargate Conspiracy: Revealing the Truth Behind Extraterrestrial Contact, Military Intelligence and the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt, Turin Shroud: In Whose Image? The Truth Behind the Centuries-Long Conspiracy of Silence*, and *Double Standards: the Rudolf Hess Cover Up*, it would be surprising if they didn't try to prove that the House of Windsor is homicidal.

Still, genteel *Mail* readers might have blanched just a little bit when they reached the following matter of fact observation: "We then came to the death of the Queen Mother earlier this year – just before her daughter the Queen was due to begin celebrations of her Golden Jubilee."

"The parallels with the death of Queen Mary are curious. Few would doubt that the Queen Mother's sense of duty would have made her determined to avoid wrecking her daughter's Jubilee by dying in the middle of it."

"Nevertheless any ordinary individual would be sent to prison for helping a grandmother to die, however beloved she was and whatever the motive." Sadly the authors don't identify which of the Princes — or Princess — actually bumped her off. But all things considered, shouldn't the *Mail* drop the old "Dieu Et Mon Droit" crest from its masthead, now that it has discovered that someone killed granny to avoid ruining the Corrs and Atomic Kitten concert in the Mall?

■ EARLIER this year German media giant Bertelsmann, which owns Random House and Transworld publishing companies, did some public breast-beating after admitting that in the 1930s and 1940s it had been a donor to the Nazi party and had published most of the key texts of the Third Reich.

"Bertelsmann published a variety of papers and books that clearly had anti-Jewish bias," Independent Historical Commission (IHC) chairman Saul Friedlaender, an Israeli historian, told a news conference. There were hung heads and apologies all round. Tim Arnold, corporate secretary of Bertelsmann, told the *Today* programme: "The values of Bertelsmann then are irreconcilable with the company today. The company is now a global player in the media industry."

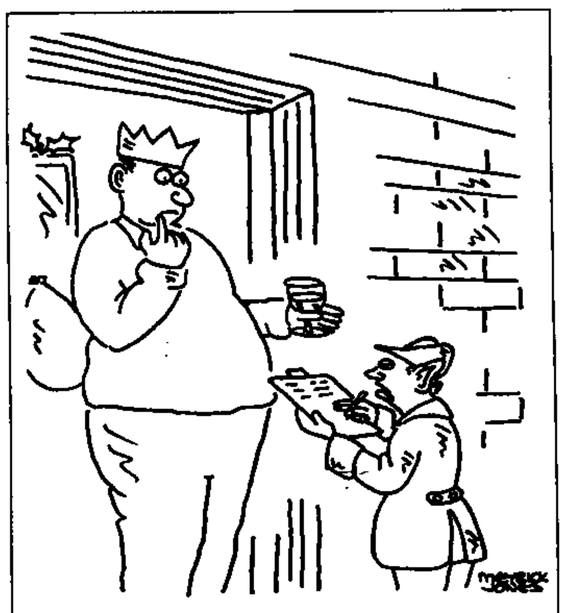
What no one apparently noticed at the time was that Bertelsmann still publishes *Mein Kampf* — under Random House's Pimlico imprint, although its sale is still banned in Germany. So perhaps the past is not so irreconcilable after all.

■ AS Waterstone's has become a retailer rather than a "bookseller", the smaller Ottakar's chain has been presenting itself as the local, friendly, touchy-feely alternative. But the mask appears to be slipping.

A couple of years ago the company launched a range of local history books, compiled by store managers using text and photographs contributed by customers. The concept has since won several awards and allowed the chain to show how in touch it is with its customers.

Now, with more of the titles about to appear, the company has proudly announced that the books have been profitable – because the authors don't receive a royalty. In fact, most contributors don't get paid in any shape or form. The editor of each book chooses the three best entries and awards each a prize of £250. No wonder the books are all in the black. Any other publisher thinking of following this as a business model will have the Society of Authors down on them like a ton of bricks.

'Bookworm'



"Would you say Santa Claus is doing an average job, a good job, or an excellent job?"

UNIVERSITY NEWS

AS THE FALLOUT from the farcical UCL / Imperial college merger continues to be felt throughout the University of London, with UCL's acting provost Sir Derek Roberts railing against the "lies and hypocrisy" of his colleagues, one thing no one seems to be able to agree on is whose idea the whole thing was in the first place.

Sir Derek puts the blame squarely with his counterpart at Imperial, Sir Richard Sykes. "On returning to UCL, in mid-September I went to see Sir Richard – now rector of Imperial College – to talk about areas of mutual interest and collaboration", he tells the current issue of the *UCL Newsletter*. "After half-an-hour he said, 'Why don't we cut through all this and explore a merger to create a world-leader?'"

In an interview with the *Malaysian Star*, however, Sir Richard was keen to wash his hands of the suggestion. "The idea definitely didn't come from me," he said. "Although I might have a reputation for mergers, I didn't go into the college saying that we should do a merger. But, of course, that is exactly what people think."

Someone's memory, apparently, is at fault. But whose?

Warballs

"An American commentator writing about Mayor Rudy Giuliani's response to 11 September suggested that he had somehow managed to combine charisma, efficiency and compassion, qualities which we usually expect to occur in separate personalities.

While the scales of their challenges were in no way comparable, I have thought of that description while watching [Jamie] Oliver running his redemption kitchen."

— Mark Lawson, *Guardian*.

"Bright, 47, has been with *Friends* from the outset in 1994… Next spring he will direct its one-hour finale in America, a show that is likely to be the most-hyped and widely viewed non-sports programme of the year. 'For a variety of reasons,' he claims, somewhat half-heartedly, 'it's the right time to end this. As a matter of economics, the show has gotten so expensive to produce that it's not feasible for the network or the studio to keep bringing it back. The cast members want to move on and do something different. And somehow, after 11 September, it felt as if an era had ended. It was time for the six friends to grow up out of the age of innocence.'"

— Mark Levine, *Observer*.

Pseuds Corner

But in another sense [James] Bond never went away because, both in the books and, more lavishly, in the films, his world corresponds with shocking directness with the black heart of the sexual imagination. It is quite appalling how many of the really memorable scenes are direct, Freudian renderings of castration fantasies.

PHILIP HENSHER
Independent

I recently did a blind tasting of all the best champagnes of the last century and it was phenomenal the way the Cristal stood out. There is something roguish and mischievous about it that only very stylish people understand.

SERENA SUTCLIFFE
'Me and My Champagne',
Financial Times Saturday Magazine

THE BONE
By Tom Dixon, OBE 2001
The ergonomic shape of 'The Bone' was inspired by ancient fertility symbols and in this modern incarnation the shape creates different intensities and patterns of vibration from different areas of its surface. Tom believes that design becomes interesting when you start looking at areas where design has never gone before. With 'The Bone', he set out, quite simply, to create the finest vibrator ever made.

Myla Sex Life Accessories catalogue

Heathfield Nursery should now be known as South Acton Early Excellence Centre

Internal memo circulated by
SHEILA VIZARD of Education Services,
London Borough of Ealing

The term 'Tarantinian' has been coined to refer to a set of sampled, self-authorizing signs that are cinematically assembled in processes of 'consuming-producing-expending' in the general context of a postmodern capitalism that enjoins excess. The Tarantinian ethics are elaborated, in the midst of a homogenized fast-food, movie and video culture, in relation to the heterogeneous events of violence, horror and laughter.

Description of 'The Tarantinian Ethics' by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Sage publishers catalogue.

Most memorable restaurant experience?
I took my new baby to Locanda Locatelli. Giorgio Locatelli fed him spaghetti – it was very moving.
TRACEY MACLEOD
Observer Food Monthly

Pseuds Corporate

[Fergus] Brownlee works in Turkey, Israel, South Africa and Nigeria. One dramatic weekend he witnesses an earthquake in Istanbul followed by an outbreak of hostilities while touring the Arab quarter of Jerusalem. "That experience sums up fast-moving consumer goods for me."

***Financial World*, the magazine of the Institute of Financial Services**

CONTRIBUTORS: Ray McDowell, David Marks, C.J. Appleby, Lord Gnome, Rowan Carstairs, Jon Philibert, Steve White.

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

PROACTIVE GETS REACTIVE

LAST month the *Eye* tried to get a list of transfers of clients of Cheshire agents Proactive Sports Management to and from Aston Villa football club. The reason for the request was the fact that John Gregory, the former manager of Aston Villa who has since moved to Derby County, is a friend and client of Paul Stretford, chief executive of Proactive Sports Management.

As we reported in *Eye* 1067, the club told us the transfer details were "a confidential matter" and so it could not provide the list. Proactive Sports Management said it was its policy not to make any comment on such matters. Now, however, we *can* provide readers with some relevant information thanks to the lawyers for Proactive Sports Management.

In a letter to the editor on 19 November the firm's Leeds solicitors DLA disclose that four Proactive players – Alan Thompson, Steve Watson, Steve Stone and Peter Schmeichel – were "involved in transfers to or from Aston Villa", and that the total number of transfers in which they were involved were seven. They also point out that Bosko Balaban has never been a client of Proactive or had any connection with it.

Unfortunately the main purpose of the lawyers' letter was to complain "in the strongest possible terms" about the *Eye* article which, they claimed, was "a very serious libel". They suggest a payment of £25,000 each to Mr Stretford and his company. The *Eye* will be contesting these claims on grounds, among others of public interest; but in the meantime we pass on the information helpfully provided by the agency.

Other interesting information about Mr Stretford can be found at the very back of last year's voluminous prospectus of the Proactive Sports Group plc. Note 5.13 reveals: "Paul Stretford was a director of Frontlead Limited, which was subject to a winding up resolution on 11th February 1993 and had an estimated creditors deficiency of £128,820 at that date." Most of the creditors of the bust company were small businesses and suppliers.

Proactive featured extensively in a two-part investigation last May by Radio Five Live's investigative programme *On The Line*. The programmes featured Peter Schmeichel *(right)*, the world-famous goalkeeper who used to play for Manchester United and now plays for Manchester City. The programmes revealed that the Wilmslow headquarters of Paul Stretford's Proactive Sports Group boasts a huge wax statue of Peter Schmeichel in action. No footballer is held in higher regard than the Great Dane. The following ten facts may or may not be relevant.

1. After a short stint in Portugal when he left United, Schmeichel returned to Britain where he was snapped up by Aston Villa.

2. The manager of Aston Villa at the time was John Gregory.

3. Gregory is a close friend (and client) of Paul Stretford, boss of Proactive Sports.

4. Schmeichel's agent is Proactive Sports.

5. John Gregory has 60,000 shares in Proactive.

6. Peter Schmeichel has 300,000 shares in Proactive.

7. Peter Schmeichel now keeps goal for Manchester City.

8. His contract there was negotiated by Proactive.

9. The manager of Manchester City is Kevin Keegan.

10. Kevin Keegan has 200,000 shares in Proactive.

On 4 December Aston Villa and Mr Gregory found themselves in the headlines after the club revealed that it had handed its files on its foreign transfers to the Football Association's compliance unit. Later that day the Football Association denied that there was a formal investigation into these transfers. John Gregory angrily insisted he was completely innocent of any dubious dealing and announced that anyone who challenged that would do so "at their peril".

QUOTE TO REMEMBER: "The industry has an increasing responsibility to conduct itself in a manner that protects all parts of the chain and this philosophy is one I fully endorse. From the board down, our commitment is based on excellence to our clients and transparency throughout the often complicated and lengthy contract negotiations." (Paul Stretford in his chief executive's review, for the period to 31 August 2001.)

POWER FAILURE

REPORTING last August on the merger between the National Grid company (aka National Greed) and Transco, the *Eye* predicted that British consumers' gas and electricity would be swallowed by a single private monopoly and that they might be hit by the new monopoly's reckless investments abroad. The warning has been vindicated earlier than expected.

The company now says it faces debts of more than £14bn, and exceptional charges have obliged it to report an interim loss. Transco (or Lattice as it is now known) made a surplus to last March of £261m, but this has been converted into a loss of £669m, while the deficit at National Greed has gone up from £36m to £202m. Those parts of the company that supply gas and electricity in Britain are doing perfectly well, and the main reason for the deteriorating position is speculative investments abroad. For instance, National Greed is staring down a hole as deep as £650m as a result of its businesses in America, notably its exciting purchase of Niagara Mohawk. What are the company's solutions for this debacle?

Invest more in privatised energy companies abroad. Roger Urwin, chief executive, says he is watching the privatisation of energy assets in Ontario, Canada, "with interest".

Raise electricity charges in Britain. The company says it will be approaching the regulator with a request to raise gas and electricity prices for British consumers.

Roger Urwin

Increase pension charges. (The sad history of the plundering of the National Greed pension fund – and the support it got from the highest courts in the land – is set out in *Eyes* 956 and 1028).

These horrors were predicted with eloquent accuracy by Labour's energy spokesman when he bitterly opposed electricity privatisation in 1990. He promised that the next Labour government would take the industry back into public ownership. His name? The young and ambitious MP for Sedgefield, Tony Blair.

BEYOND THE CALL OF STAMP DUTY

PAYMASTER-GENERAL "Red" Dawn Primarolo is finding it very difficult to answer straight questions about the Inland Revenue's sale of its buildings to a company in the sort of tax haven the government usually deplores.

On 7 November she faced a question from Austin Mitchell, Labour MP for Grimsby, about how much stamp duty had been paid on the deal. Evasion of stamp duty has been very much in the news recently. Primarolo's colleague, high-flying economic secretary to the treasury Ruth Kelly, said: "In particular, some companies are determined not to pay their full share of duty and structure transactions in increasingly artificial ways to achieve that. This activity represents a significant threat to the tax base. We are determined to stop this abuse."

How embarrassing it would be if the international millionaires from the Mapeley group of companies who bought the Inland Revenue and Customs buildings from the government managed to evade stamp duty! Strong suspicion that no stamp duty was paid is encouraged by the fact that the Inland Revenue was advised on the deal by City solicitors Lovells, who constantly boast about their expertise in avoiding stamp duty on property deals. For their part, Mapeley's advice came from another solicitors' firm specialising in stamp duty avoidance, Nabarro Nathanson. No wonder Austin Mitchell, who has been following the Mapeley scandal, asked his question.

Red Dawn replied that amounts of tax paid in any circumstances were confidential, and that therefore she couldn't help the honourable member. Mr Mitchell tried again, asking if the sale of the buildings was liable to stamp duty, and therefore if any stamp duty had been paid on the deal. On 16 November Red Dawn replied that she had "nothing to add" to her previous answer: a preposterous response, since the general liability of a property deal to stamp duty is a quite separate matter to the amounts paid, and not confidential at all.

The matter may be cleared up at the hearing of the Commons treasury select committee, which is due to meet as the *Eye* goes on sale and is expecting to hear evidence on Mapeley and related matters from Inland Revenue chairman Sir Nick Montagu and colleagues.

Other matters that might usefully be raised with Sir Nicholas are as follows:

1. When is he going to reply to the accusation that he favours big business and the rich, as set out by Nick Davies of the *Guardian*? Sir Nicholas was initially outraged by what he called Davies's "slur" on his department, whereas in fact any slur was on himself. He told a conference of top Revenue people at the Royal Lancaster Hotel on 31 October that he was not going to dignify Davies's article with a response, a statement that was greeted with some scepticism since everyone in the room knew Davies's allegations are perfectly true.

2. Did Dave Hartnett, the Revenue's deputy chairman and most business-friendly senior official, seek advice about the Mapeley contract from the department's own special investigation section, and its expert on these matters, Dave Shaw? And was Shaw's unsurprising response that the Revenue shouldn't touch the transaction with a barge pole?

3. Could Sir Nicholas name the experienced and able anti-avoidance senior officials who have been pushed out of the business tax department, or are leaving early in disgust (at least six of them) — and what does he have to say about their replacements' capacity for winning the Order of the Brown Nose?

4. Can he put a sum on the cost in lost tax of the Revenue's performance on what is known in the department as the "deferred revenue expenditure debacle"?

AN EXPLOSIVE REPORT FROM THE MoD

NO WONDER defence ministers hoped no one would uncover the results of its two-month inquiry into the loss of 20 anti-tank missile warheads and eight mines, along with eight packages of plastic explosives, which floated off down the Bristol Channel last spring (see last *Eye*).

The report reveals a shambolic and scandalous attitude to safety at both the ministry of defence and at its privatised arm, QinetiQ, which led to the loss of the deadly cargo from the St Thomas Head Military Range near Weston-Super-Mare.

QinetiQ was supposed to destroy the ordnance, which was loaded on a wooden pallet, in a controlled underwater explosion. Instead the whole lot drifted into the busy Bristol Channel never to be seen again.

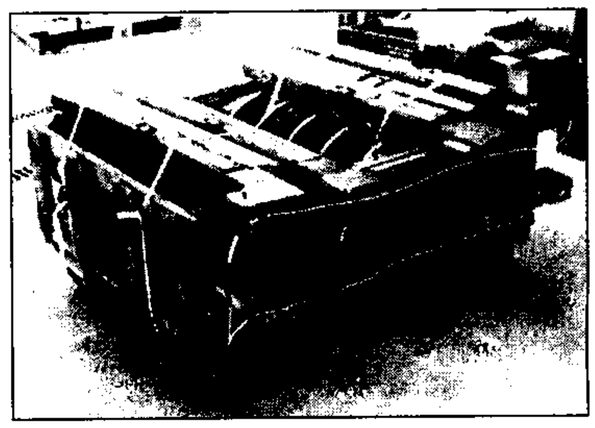
The investigation by the Defence Ordnance Safety Group found that the pallet wasn't properly secured to the seabed, its buoyancy had never been tested and in any case such a mix of explosive material should never have been packed together. Nor should it have been left overnight awaiting demolition. So far, so dangerous.

In fact there was no authority at all for such demolitions. The necessary certification and paperwork for the disposal did not exist; staff weren't properly trained; no one was in overall charge of the fiasco; and the MoD safety officer was also QinetiQ's trials officer, creating a conflict of interest between safety and the need to carry out demilitarisation work.

The inquiry found records were so poorly kept at the range that there were no clear audit trails for this dangerous and sensitive material. For example, it looked as if more deadly material had been disposed of than had actually been received. On at least two occasions loads bigger than the limit of the equivalent of 600kgs of TNT were blown up.

The MoD's once-every-three-years range safety inspection had not been completed, and actions needed following the 1998 inspection – including further trials in the demolition of multiple warhead and munitions explosions – had not been addressed. As if all this weren't bad enough, the procedures for confirming underwater detonation were deemed "suspect", suggesting there might be lots of unexploded ordnance in the mudflats.

The report said all mass weapon disposal should be halted immediately at the range and only single items been blown up. The implication is that by losing the ordnance, perhaps QinetiQ's clodhoppers actually avoided causing an even bigger disaster.



Missing missiles: anyone has seen these?

SEN but no sensibility

PARENTS of children with special educational needs (SEN) did not need last week's audit commission report to tell them how miserably the education system is failing them.

School heads, worried about league tables and restricted budgets, are often unwelcoming; and special schools are closing at an alarming rate. Cash-strapped local education authorities are finding it increasingly hard to cope with growing numbers of children with "special needs" – now said to be one in five.

To a local education authority a child with a detailed "statement of need" is a financial liability. And the temptation for those who want to keep their council taxes down appears to be to delay identifying the children and understate their needs.

Conflict often starts the moment a child is "statemented". Henrietta Spink, who has two severely disabled sons, Henry, 14, and Freddie, 11, has had prolonged battles with the London borough of Wandsworth. Freddie was born with his guts in his chest, spent a long time on life support, suffers acute reflux, limited mobility and has learning difficulties and autistic tendencies.

One expert assessing his needs said he would benefit hugely from as much speech therapy as possible. It wasn't forthcoming. Even after an appeal to a special educational needs (SEN) tribunal, he was awarded an almost useless *nine hours a year*. That represents 15 minutes per school week at a cost of £450 a year. By contrast, says Mrs Spink, her local authority was prepared to spend thousands, including the costs of a barrister, defending the decision when she challenged it at an SEN tribunal. And Freddie still doesn't get one-on-one therapy.

Mrs Spink fared slightly better for Henry – unable to walk or talk but with no obvious brain damage – but only after huge financial and emotional cost. After nine months, when Henry was without an education, she finally got him into a school outside the borough. But he doesn't get individual attention as outlined in his statement either.

As the audit commision found, the Spink family's experience is far from unique. Appeals to tribunals are rising by 20 percent a year (last year there were 3,200). Some local authorities eventually cave in at the tribunal door, suggesting to parents there is an "unwritten policy" to delay for as long as possible.

The commission has called for a government review of special needs provision. But there is no indication the government is prepared to act, or that life will become any easier for these struggling families, about 40 of whom are launching what is thought to be the first group high court action to force change.

ENERGY

UK in gas attack horror

A LITTLE-NOTICED one-paragraph written Commons reply in November revealed that the DTI had decided to allow a giant, polluting, gas-fired power station to be built in the New Forest. Patricia Hewitt's energy minister, Brian Wilson, had decided to grant consent for an 860 megawatt gas-fired power station to be built at Marchwood.

Why – at a time when there is a 20 percent surplus of generating capacity, the wholesale price has fallen by 35 per cent and companies are shutting down power stations? The DTI supplied a London telephone number for "Marchwood Power Ltd". Inquirers dialling it are referred to the head office of Aquila Energy Ltd in Kansas City, Missouri.

Aquila's vice-president, Al Butkus, tells the *Eye*: "We applied for that licence more than 18 months ago. It was a different market situation then. The market has deteriorated. Are we going to build it? Probably not. We haven't made any decision." But they will have the option to do so for five years. By which time government policy on gas may well have undergone several U-turns. In opposition, as shadow energy spokesman Frank Dobson denounced the "dash for gas", led by Enron with the blessing of Michael Heseltine, as an environmental outrage. But after Labour won the 1997 election Margaret Beckett reversed Labour's policy and sanctioned new gas-fired stations. Her successor Peter Mandelson introduced a moratorium on them in 1998. Then Liar Byers turned back in favour of gas after US companies put pressure on Blair. Hewitt and Wilson have continued the dash for gas by approving a new polluting power station on a greenfield site — while saying how much they love clean renewables…

POLICE FARCES

Gagging for it

IRENE BHADRESA, a barrister employed by the British transport police, was sacked after reporting her boss, Inspector Steve Craske, for throwing 75 live prosecution files into a bin.

She was awarded £275,000 damages. Mr Craske was charged, acquitted and has left the force. The transport police said that they had settled with Irene Bhadresa because "of the cost of this case to the public purse". But the real reason they threw in the towel was the disclosure of a "force order" to all transport police that would almost certainly have landed senior officers with nasty charges for contempt of court.

A year ago lawyers for Irene Bhadresa heard of a force order instructing police officers not to say anything in court or at a tribunal that would "bring into question the integrity of the officer or the force". The employment tribunal instructed the police to issue another order assuring police who gave evidence for Mrs Bhadresa that their careers would not be jeopardised as a result. The transport police refused to do so.

This refusal was denounced by the employment tribunal as "unreasonable". The police's case was struck out. They appealed. At the employment appeals tribunal new evidence emerged to suggest that the force order had been amended specifically to prevent officers giving truthful evidence to the tribunal. Shocked by this possibility, the judge gave the police permission to come back to court to explain what he called the "sinister implications". The police abruptly dropped their appeals and agreed to stump up the damages.

Radio gaga

AIRWAVE, the new national police radio system, is a waste of £300m public cash and no technical fix exists to allow emergency services to talk to each other, parliament's spending watchdog has concluded.

Despite the much-vaunted joint emergency service control rooms now being pushed as part of fire service "modernisation", the home office went ahead with Airwave, provided by BT under a £1.5bn PFI deal (see *Eyes passim*), which is not capable of communicating with fire or ambulance systems.

The Commons public accounts committee (PAC) was not impressed. As its report says: "Compared with a series of regional procurements, which would have provided inter-operability with other emergency services, Airwave will cost an additional £300m… The emergency services… are still unable to communicate easily with each other during major incidents and a solution is still a long way off."

Airwave has already been roundly criticised by the national audit office (NAO) and the Police Federation who are worried about dangers to officers' health from the TETRA pulse system.

You can contact Paul Foot on 020 7287 3183 or the In the Back team on 020 7437 4017

In the City

WHILE the phoney pharaoh Mohamed Fayed pays himself ever larger unearned dividends to finance his mainly loss-making, debt-burdened empire and truly pharaonic lifestyle, a "black hole" has opened up in the Harrods pension fund.

The latest accounts from Harrods Holdings reveal that the fund was only 80 percent funded by its assets as the result of a £18.5m deficit at the February year-end. This compares with a small surplus in April last year before the impact of falling share prices and the new accounting regulation FRS17, which requires an annual market snapshot of a fund's assets and liabilities rather than relying on the triennial valuation method.

The 20 percent deficit is one of the largest so far disclosed by major companies following the introduction this year of the new accounting standard. It may also underestimate the present position given that since February the FT 100 index has fallen a further 20 percent.

The Harrods pension fund, which is dominated by present and former employees of the Knightsbridge store, has more than 6,000 members. At the year end the fund's investments – surprisingly heavily in equities – were valued at £174m. However, liabilities to actual and potential pensioners were put at £192.5m.

The deficit – after an offset for deferred tax – of £13m will have had to be paid into the fund and written off reserves. One more cross for Harrods to bear along with Fayed's increasing demands for dividends which also have to come from reserves – £110m down in the last two years.

With the further fall in the stock market it may well be that the pension fund will require another top-up this year. Certainly investment returns are proving less than needed by this generous final salary scheme. Fayed has already taken some avoiding action. He has not closed the scheme. However, the rules have been changed so that employees need to work for five years before they are eligible to join. A tough task given the high turnover of staff at the store.

The fund is managed by Henderson Global Investors, Capital International and Legal & General. Their presence and that of the custodians Bank of New York plus internal records suggest that rumours of Fayed borrowings are wide of the mark.

Not surprisingly, given the 75 percent reliance on equities, performance has been disappointing though far from disastrous in the past three years. The fund had a value of £196m in 2000. However its surplus has been eroding since the 1999 actuarial valuation when it was put at a far from generous 107 percent.

The fund has removed one large liability in highly unusual circumstances, in which a former director's pension has been used to pay off a personal debt of £266,802 to Fayed. The director is suspected to be Fayed's long-serving personal secretary Mark Griffiths, who resigned in July last year after more than 15 years amid allegations relating to unauthorised transfers out of the pharaoh's personal accounts to fund personal spending.

In November last year the former director's debt was assigned by Fayed to Harrods, a curious decision. It was then settled in full the following month. The payment would appear to have come from the director's Harrods pension fund. For an identical amount of £267,000 was paid to Harrods by the fund as the transfer value of a scheme member's pension fund.

Presumably the former director had no other substantial assets. The word is Griffiths was required to sell a London house Fayed had helped him purchase. Doubtless Fayed was not amused by the thought of Griffiths moving his pension pot elsewhere. But how to stop him or get his hands on the money? Even the Harrods pension fund

could not transfer the pension to Fayed personally. However, it seems the answer may have been for the former director to agree to the money being transferred directly to his former employer Harrods, who had made contributions on his behalf. And as Fayed owns Harrods, this way he was indirectly repaid and the former director did not walk away with any more money.

The minutiae of the Harrods accounts indicate the financial pressure Fayed is under at a time when trading at the store – the only money earner – is struggling. Even with an extra week of retail sales to count turnover was still down from £474m to £466m. On a like-for-like period the fall was even greater – to £457m. The current year is unlikely to be much better. Operating profits fell even faster – from £38m to £26m.

Borrowings from Royal Bank of Scotland by Harrods Holdings were up to £337m from £329m. But the situation at the store is far less healthy. Net cash inflow from operations was less than £3m. The previous year helped by the RBS loan it was £383m. The amount of cash in the business at year end fell by £21m instead of rising by £10m. Net debt rose from £277m to £306m.

Fayed is effectively stripping reserves to pay unearned dividends from Harrods and other group companies in order to justify taking the ever larger dividends from Holdings paid into his offshore companies. That money then seemingly is recycled back onshore to fund Fulham and his own lavish lifestyle.

Harrods International, which runs the duty-free shops, paid an £8m dividend to Harrods, up from £6m, even though net profits fell from £5m to £3.4m. Reserves have fallen in the past two years from £7.3m to £1.7m. Harrods itself paid a dividend of £28m, up from £6m, to Harrods (UK) out of net profits up from £10m to £17m. But this profit figure relied on an accounting device which generated a supposed near £14m "paper" profit from selling back to Fayed a 25 percent stake in the Harrods Online disaster which he had force fed into the company at inflated prices.

Last year Harrods declared that Fayed had bought the shares back for £37m, almost the identical price he had extracted from Harrods into one of his offshore pockets. That was a deal done in October 2001 – well after the accounts date — under former auditors PwC. But somehow new auditors Grant Thornton have agreed that Harrods made a profit on the deal. Perhaps because PwC estimated the value of the Online shares resold to Fayed at less than £5m.

Harrods (UK) then paid an £82m dividend to Harrods Holdings, up from £69m, even though its net profits were only £39m. And Holdings paid Fayed £74m out of net profits of under £16m.

This raiding of reserves cannot go on indefinitely. Property sales – such as the £52m last year for the Kensington depository – and paper profits can only boost reserves so much. How long before RBS becomes concerned? Bankers are usually alerted when reserves are used to pay dividends rather than maintained to help finance the company. But how else can Fayed finance Fulham and his personal spending now that the Inland Revenue is on his case?

Perhaps that is why Fayed delayed filing the accounts until the end of November, even though they had been signed off by the auditors and the board in June.

NO DOUBT the Dear Leader's tax advisers will be ensuring that both he and, particularly, the high earning Cherie do not miss a trick with their little property purchases in Bristol.

Their half-blind trust will presumably receive an income from the second flat, even if young Euan does not have to pay rent or does not sub-let to fellow students. That rent can then be used to offset mortgage payments – presumably the reason why there is a mortgage. Then of course there is the expected capital gain on the two properties over the three years that Euan is in residence. Clifton is a hot area although there has been a boom in buy-to-let residential properties, not just for students from wealthy homes but also professionals and second home buyers. Normally that capital gain would be taxable in the trust at the beneficiaries Tony and Cherie's top rate of up to 40 percent. The trust is unlikely to be tax effective in avoiding tax for the Blairs – although it can help for inheritance

THE DIRECTORS

DREDGE & RIGG

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Stock Horror

by 'Bruin'

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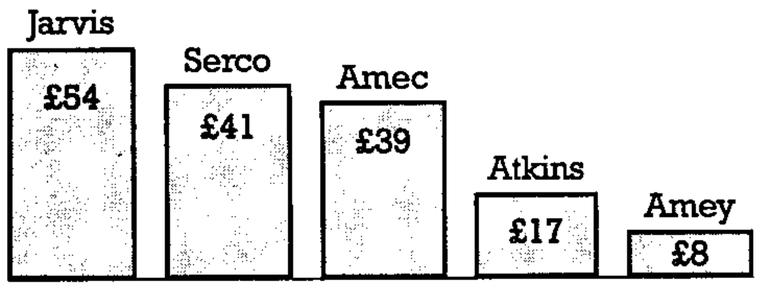


tax – as it was established with their money from selling their Islington home in 1997. As they are UK resident it would be seen as their trust and taxable. But if the flats were given to Euan as a present then that gains tax bill is sidestepped and he could then either keep the flats as an investment or sell one as his main home and also avoid any gains tax. Capitalism works – as New Labour keeps telling us.

THE WICKES debacle recalls all the bad old days of the Serious Farce Office. Perhaps not surprising, as the original case controller was none other than Fred Coford, who played a key role in the 1993 Roger Levitt "no jail time" sentencing fiasco which also greatly damaged the SFO's credibility. "Napoleon" ran the Wickes case for two years until he departed for private practice in 2000. It is said, no doubt unkindly and incorrectly, that SFO director Rosalind Wright did not exactly discourage Coford from a new career.

The mistakes in the Wickes case would seem to have been made at the start when it was decided to charge former chairman Henry Sweetbaum and three other senior executives of the plc parent. There was never any clear evidence that they knew of the accounting fraud which boosted profits between 1994 and 1996.

Furthermore the SFO did know, as a result of evidence given by one of those who was involved in the fraud, that the directors had been kept in the dark. Despite the fact that one of the key conspirators had effectively exonerated the directors as long ago as 1998 the SFO continued to press on with the prosecution, charging Sweetbaum and the others in 1999 – beginning a possible £40m fiasco.

Perhaps the SFO lawyers assumed, Micawber-like, that evidence would turn up or that the claims that the directors had not been involved were untrue. If so they were expensively wrong. After a trial lasting 182 days the jury took only 8 hours to acquit Sweetbaum and two fellow directors. A third had already been discharged by the trial judge.

THE WICKES result is unlikely to improve relations between the SFO and Scotland Yard, which have sunk to new lows in recent months. So much so that the Yard is threatening to withdraw Fraud Squad officers from the SFO.

The threat is to no longer second detectives to the SFO but to have them only working on cases from the Yard, not the SFO's offices. The reason for this dramatic decision to reduce co-operation is the growing belief that too many SFO investigations are unfocused and unnecessarily time-consuming, resulting in detectives being involved in mundane tasks such as photocopying rather than investigation. The Wickes case, which began in 1998, lasted four years and culminated in a trial taking 10 months, is an example of where Scotland Yard believes it does not want to be. Too many at the SFO take the Julie Andrews "climb every mountain" approach to fraud investigation. Unless there are changes in SFO methods relations between the SFO and Scotland Yard, which with the City Police carry out most investigations, look set to get worse.

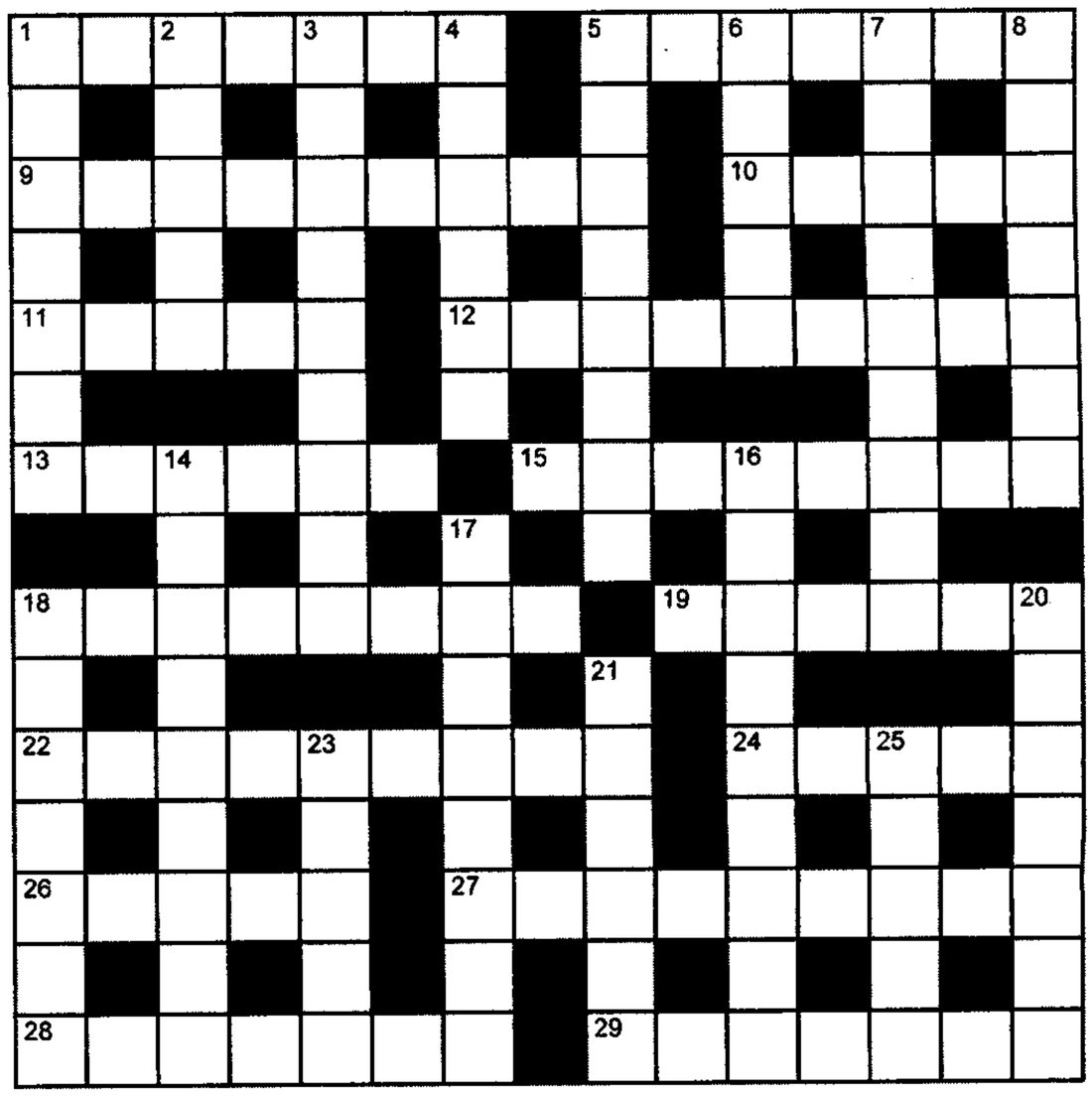
'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 224

by Cyclops

£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 19 December 2002.

Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk



ACROSS

1/9 Terrified of being unable to hold your drink? (7,4,5)
5 Readers' response to this prize crossword? "Pisspot catch involving Cyclops' overwrought endings" (7)
9 See 1ac.
10 Horny thing, balls undoubtedly grown large, enthusiastically starts (5)
11 King Arthur's main lay buggered (5)
12 How Blair sees himself: a mixture of Attlee and 'HH', with a touch of matiness? (2,3,4)
13 Brenda: "One gets in flipping cross mood" (6)
15 Liberal pledge reportedly that's not too 'blue' (4,4)
18 What might be picked by hand? Fungus, literally (5-3)
19 Fanny Batting cake (6)
22 It's rank to penetrate a chap with temperature – and spiteful (9)
24 Male member interwoven by wives and other partners (5)
26 Revolution's ring leader finally did a Tyson (5)
27 Get excited and reproduce, though tense inside (9)
28 Had an obsession: got hard when hiding in the vicinity (7)
29 Island's way to get Kay to get out tits (2,5)

DOWN

1 One who roughly puts down a tosser (7)
2 No initiative-taker but in the reckoning at bedtime? (5)
3 Powerless feeling of trouble-maker Tony involved with EC (9)
4 Mobster demands $1000 to remove someone's dick? (6)
5 Where you've got to in the *Kama Sutra*? (8)
6 Pole mounts bare-busted slasher (5)
7 e.g. grub? Get lost! (6,3)
8 Cyclops' erection – in colour – is the making of dullards (4,3)
14 Look to get chest on TV (6-3)
16 Hardy, on having shag with new leader, sorry the way things turned out (5,4)
17 Seated like TV's Roland Merry (3-5)
18 Arse on Penny supplemented with sickly top (4,3)
20 Painkillers: the statistics (7)
21 Terrible shite about Conservative standards (6)
23 Nobbled, visit the loo and crap (3,2)
25 Give a rollicking to Cook (5)

Crossword 223 winner: ALAN RICHARDSON

ACROSS: 1 Balls-up 5 Nose job 9 Alpha 10 On the pull 11 Speaker 12 Non-hero 13/14 Does my bum look big in this 17 Spread-eagling 21 Belly up 24 Not half 25 Loud-mouth 26 Noted 27 Absolve 28 Sketchy.

DOWN: 1 Brassy 2 Lip-reader 3 Shackle 4 Programme 5 Not on 6 Sternum 7 Joule 8 Bollocks 15 Orgiastic 16 Isabella 18 Abysmal 19 Intense 20 Off-day 22 Louts 23 Prune.

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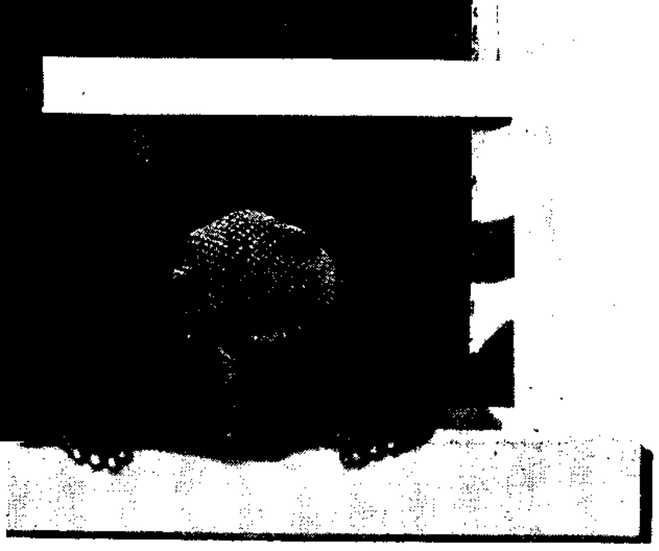

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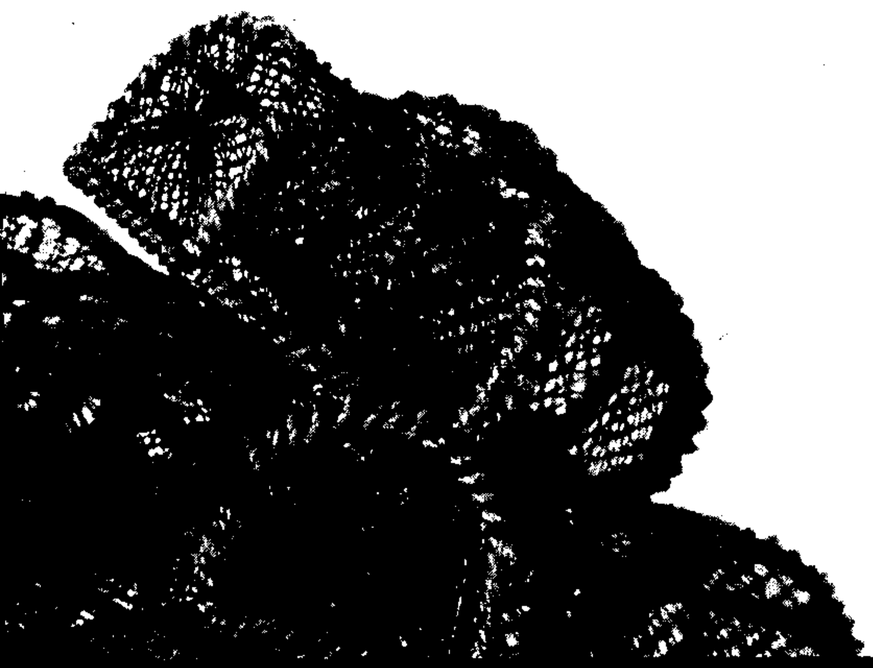

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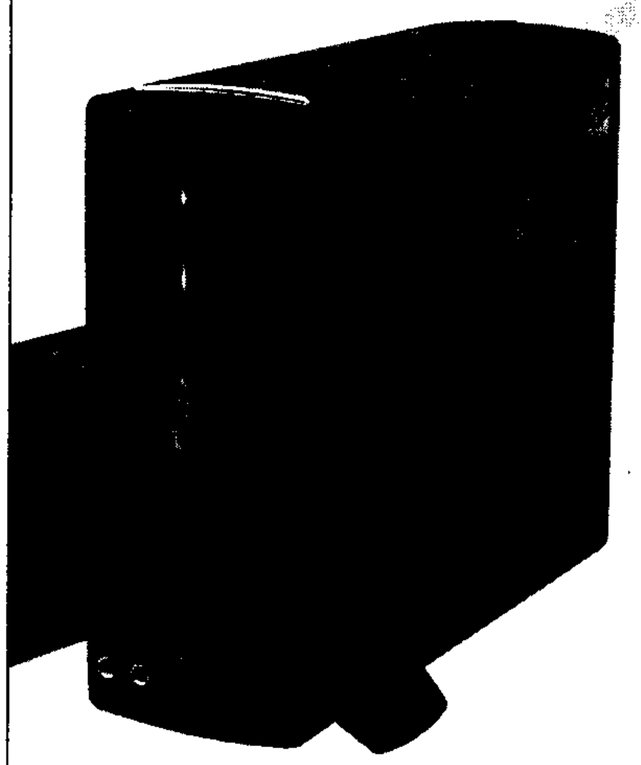

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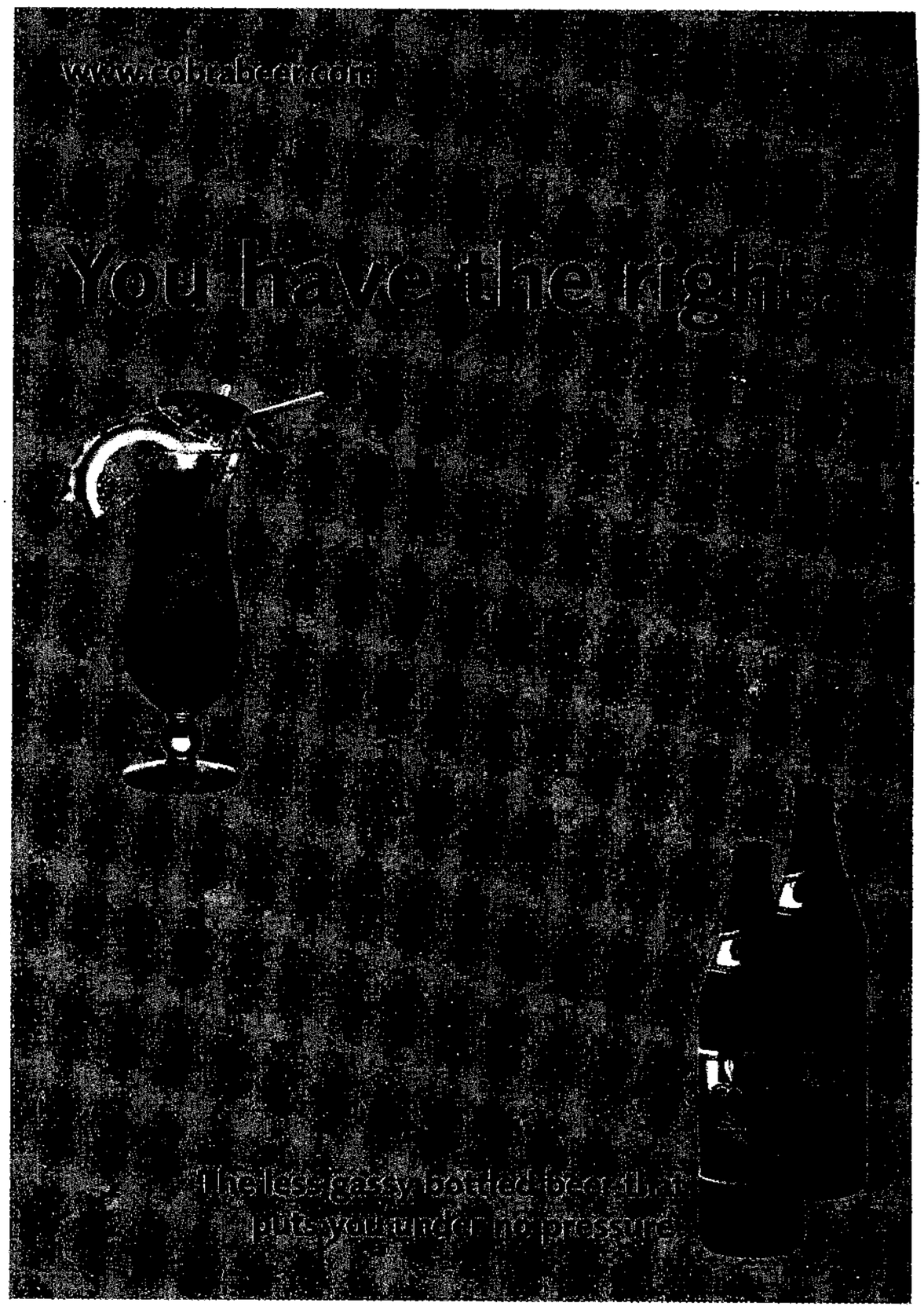

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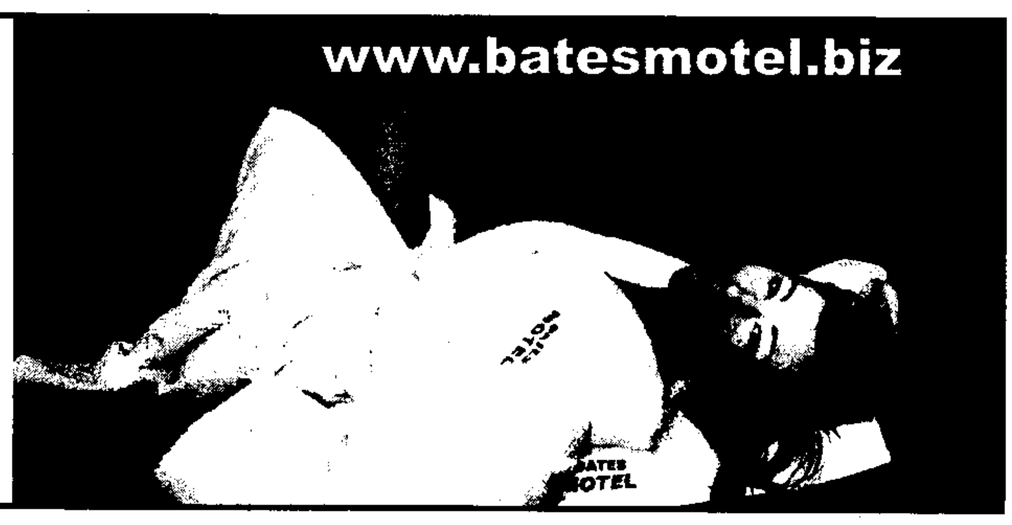

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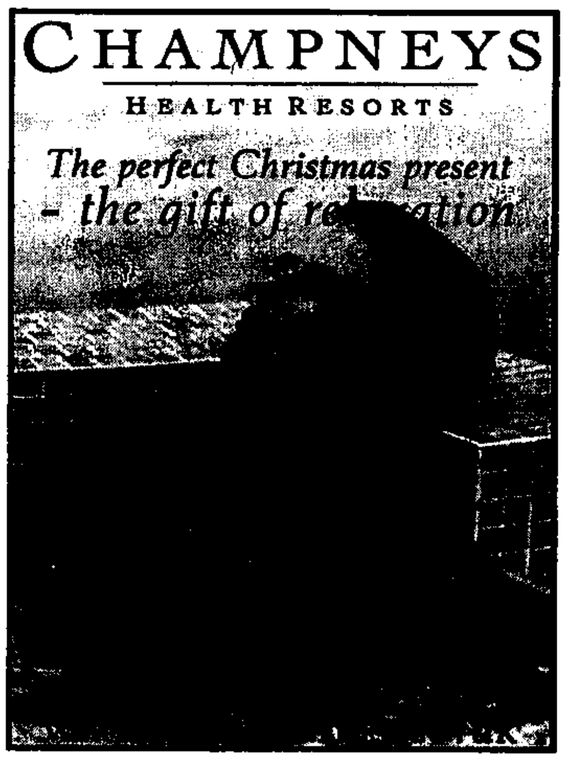

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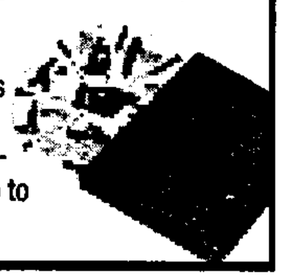

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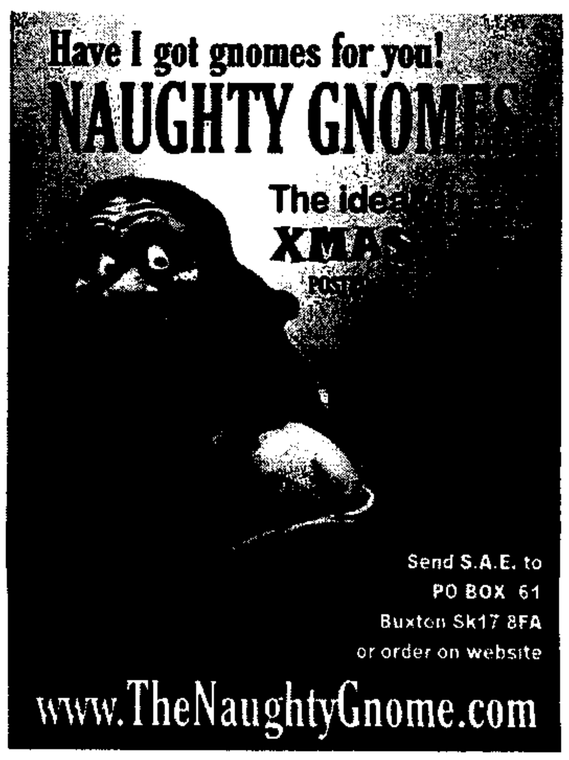

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EYE LOVE

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INDEPENDENT professional gentleman, 28, chocolate brown eyes & skin own home + career, 6ft, medium build WLTM mature fun articulate sensual woman for aromatherapy, cuisine & togetherness. Box 0769.

SENSITIVE, LIBERAL, academic female, 31, seeks similar male, 35-45, interested in exploring life, for friendship or more. ballet-tanzerin@danceart.net

LITTLE BOY LOST. 36, 6ft, young spirit, old soul, vital, wicked sense of humour, please no more users, please no rude replies. Trulyloveswomen@aol.com

PRETTY, SLIM LADY would like to meet despicably comfortable gentleman 40-60 for a mutually rewarding relationship. E-mail: jillydarling@hotmail.com

FEMALE, 34, SOUTH, tall, slim, clever, dog-owner wltm 30-40 male with humorous soul. Box 0569.

AFFECTIONATE SLIM fit Nottingham married male artist seeks n/s female 25-40 for occasional discreet liaison. robertbaker1962@hotmail.com

WANTED – gentle romantic male lover aged 44 to 49. Include photo. Box 0169.

CUNNING linguist (49 Oxford-based) seeks feisty female for no-strings friendship and fun! oxfordblue69@hotmail.com

AGEING ROUÉ – all the usual fetishes and vices (and some unusual ones). Used to be handsome. Own teeth, fair and credit card. Married (as you would expect). Seeks female who is not Germaine Greer to behave disgracefully with. If all else fails will consider G.Greer providing I don't have to say "I love you" in the morning or give head. M4 corridor/South. Box 0269.

POLITICAL correction? Authoritative handsome/M editor 43 seeking yielding F/fantasist – 07050 210824.

ARTHUR DENT, 31, wltm Fenchurch, 25-30, for life, the universe and everything. Box 0666.

LITERATE, FUN professional male, 30s, WLTM slim but curvy arty female, 25-35 yrs. London/Mids/North. E-mail: cah0831@yahoo.co.uk.

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ECCENTRIC, BOOKISH male, sixties child, seeks libidinous under-appreciated bluestocking for convoluted conversations, para-psychological peregrinations, tantric trysts and kindred spirituality. Central East, Far North, Anywhere.

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EYE FIND

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